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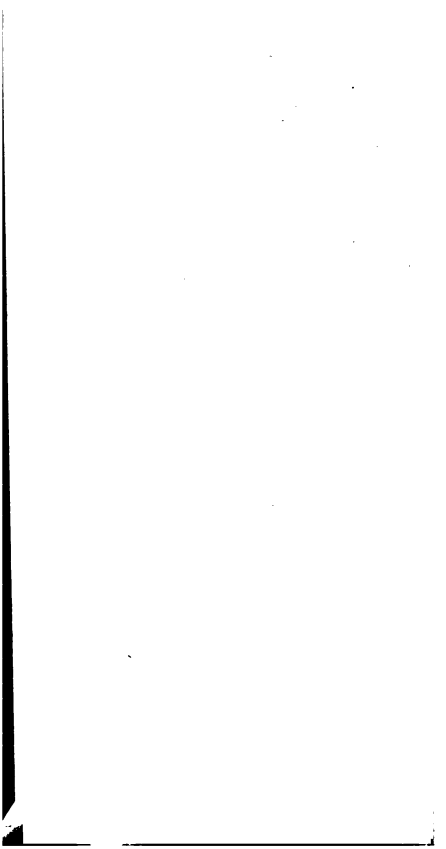

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CARPET COURTSHIP

Carpet Courtship

A Story of some Imperfect Persons

BY

THOMAS COBB

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Carpet Courtship

CHAPTER I

At half-past ten o'clock on the evening of the last Tuesday in May the drawing-room door of Mrs. Murchison's flat at South Kensington opened and a servant announced,—

"Mr. Everard Rothesay."

He was a tall, well-built, pleasant-looking young man with dark hair and a fair-complexioned, shaven face. His overcoat was thrown back, showing his evening clothes; his bearing was gay and debonair, and he looked as though he had not yet begun to take the world very seriously.

"I am sure you were surprised by my letter," said Susannah, coming impulsively to greet him.

"I was very pleased," he answered.

"But confess you were immensely surprised," she insisted, sitting down in a low chair.

"That you should ask me to call?" he suggested.

"I never did such a thing before," she said. "Won't you sit down?"

"Still," he returned, smiling as though he regarded the affair as an excellent jest, "one lived in hope, you know."

"And to send the note by hand! I am sure you must have thought it very strange!"

"It was enough for me to know it was true," said Everard.

"Surely, you wondered why I wanted you so urgently to-night!"

"Oh, well," he answered, "I did n't see anything very extraordinary about it. To tell you the truth, I had n't much time — your letter was given to me just as I was starting to Lady Carstairs'."

Susannah leaned back in her chair, clasping her hands behind her loosely-coiled, dark-brown hair. Her tiny slippers peeped out beneath the edge of a voluminous, primrose-coloured tea-gown. The mobility and alertness of her small face were at once its charm and the outward and visible signs of a wayward and restless disposition; her eyes were large and blue; her bust was full and admirably curved.

Her surroundings seemed to suit her miniature form. The furniture of the flat, in which she had lived since her husband's death nearly three years

ago, was of a light, fragile, and inexpensive description; there appeared something unsubstantial, yet extremely effective, about it all.

"Did you show my letter to anybody?" she inquired.

"That was n't likely. Besides, there was no one to show it to but Frank."

"Of course you told your cousin where you were going?"

"It would have made a bad precedent," said Everard. "In any case, I don't believe he would have taken it in. I don't know what has come over Frank this evening. At dinner I could n't get a word out of him. He seems lost in the clouds."

"Poor Frank!" Susannah murmured.

"Why do you pity him?" asked Everard.

"Then," she said hastily, "to be quite honest, you imagined I wished to enjoy the pure delight of your society?"

"Did n't you?"

"I 'm afraid I was entirely selfish. I want you to do something for me."

"You have only to tell me what it is," he answered readily.

"I warn you," she said, "it is a little out of the way — what I am going to ask you to do."

"You make one feel rather curious."

"The fact is," she explained, "I — I had occasion to write to your cousin this afternoon."

"As well as to me?"

"Before I wrote to you," she answered. "And after I had sent the letter to the post I changed my mind."

"Are you prone to that kind of thing?" Everard asked.

"At all events," she insisted, "I changed my mind."

"Then I suppose Frank will get a second letter!"

"On the contrary," said Susannah, sitting suddenly upright, "I don't want him to get the first."

"But if it has been posted — "

"It will be delivered by the first post to-morrow morning."

"So that it's too late to do anything," he suggested.

"For me, yes — but not for you."

"I am afraid I don't quite understand," he said.

"How dense you are to-night!" cried Susannah. "I have told you I don't want Frank to get my letter."

"But," Everard returned, "in the same breath you say he will get it."

"It will be delivered in Jermyn Street — quite a different thing! You must see that it does n't reach his hands."

"Oh, I don't know," said Everard, looking grave. He had a habit of lifting his eyebrows on such rare occasions, his fresh-looking, boyish face becoming ludicrously solemn. "Besides," he added in some embarrassment, "even if — how can I —"

"By taking it in your own and destroying it," Susannah answered. "Surely that is perfectly simple. It 's true you would have to get up a little earlier than usual. For the rest I can't conceive anything easier."

"Than to intercept another man's letter?" Everard suggested.

"The letter is mine," she insisted. "It is ridiculous to call it his — yet. You take the wrong point of view. It is absurd to say it is Frank's letter before it 's delivered."

"I rather fancy he would," said Everard.

"He has no right to. The letter must be mine till it actually reaches his hands. I want you to oblige me by seeing it does n't."

"I 'm really very sorry — "

"But you won't do what I ask you!" cried Susannah.

"I 'll do anything else for you with pleasure."

"Except the one thing I care about. Oh, thank you. That is so very human, is n't it?"

"You see," he said, "it 's one of those things a man can't very well do."

"A woman could."

"Oh, very likely!"

"You think a woman is less scrupulous than a man," retorted Susannah, pushing back the hair from her low forehead.

"Well — her code is different, anyhow."

"Yes," she said, "it includes an obligation to serve her friends."

"But," asked Everard, "where does Frank come in? Because he seems to complicate matters."

"You may be doing him the greatest service," she returned.

"I 'm afraid he would n't see it in the same light," he said.

Susannah rose.

"Forgive me for bringing you out of your way," she cried. "I am sorry I troubled you since you 're so horrid and hard-hearted. I am very stupid!" she added, dashing her right hand across her eyes.

Everard stood looking down at her face. "I can't understand — " he began, when, perceiving his hesitation, she asked quickly:

"Frank did n't tell you then? "

"He 's the most secretive fellow in existence," Everard answered.

Resting a hand on the mantelpiece, she turned as if to look in the mirror.

"He has asked me to marry him," she said.

"You have not — "

"But I have! " she cried, facing Everard with a pout on her lips.

"You have promised to be Frank's wife? "

She nodded her head slowly in assent.

"He came this afternoon," she explained. "He stayed an immense time. I began to think he would never go."

"I suppose there was a way to get rid of him," Everard suggested.

"If I could have made up my mind — "

"Could n't you? "

"Oh, he was so persistent. He became quite eloquent."

"Eloquent — Frank! "

"I don't know," said Susannah, "why you always speak of him in that deprecatory tone."

"Then you like him in spite of your hesitation! " he cried.

"Of course I like him. No one could help liking him."

"And you are going to be my cousin," said Everard with a laugh.

"That depends on you — at least — "

"You almost tempt me to forbid the banns," he answered, meeting her eyes.

"What a foolish boy you are ! " she exclaimed.

"I am twenty-three — "

"Nobody would believe it. I always regard you as ever so many years younger than myself," said Susannah. "Your friends — the women at least — will tell you I am thirty. Cruel of them, because it 's so near the truth."

"Age is of no consequence," cried Everard, sententiously.

"But time is," she returned, "and we 're wasting it. Let me make my confession. Frank was urgent, and I — I could n't decide. He persuaded me to think it over. If by any chance I decided in his favour, I was to write to him to-night, saying he might come at twelve to-morrow. If I decided against him I was to do nothing."

"So that if he did n't hear — "

"By the first post," she explained, "he was to accept silence as a refusal."

"But of course he will hear ! "

"After he had gone," she continued, "I turned the question over in my mind. I thought — but there is no need to tell you what I thought. I scarcely know myself. Only that on the impulse of a moment I took a pen and wrote — "

"Telling Frank to come!"

"One of the servants was starting out, so I gave her the letter to post."

"What time was that?" asked Everard. "Because he may have got it already."

"The girl did n't post it till she was on her way home," said Susannah. "I have made inquiries. It won't be delivered till to-morrow. I would do almost anything to prevent it from reaching Frank."

"But why — "

"I have changed my mind," she said, tapping the carpet petulantly with her slipper. "I suppose I have a right to change my mind if I please."

"Oh, no doubt."

"I daresay you think I am rather fickle — "

"Not at all," he answered with a smile.

"It is not that I don't like Frank," she said. "I like him immensely."

"Then why — "

"Oh, you know what the man is. Can you

imagine a worse-matched pair! And yet — but I had n't the courage."

"I always thought you were rather plucky," said Everard.

"I am a coward," she answered. "There you have the key to me. I am afraid to face the ordeal. Of course, I am fickle. All cowards are. Once the letter was gone I would have given anything to recall it. Then I remembered that you were staying with Frank."

"I don't fancy," said Everard, "it is quite beyond your power to explain."

"It is exactly an explanation I wish to avoid," Susannah answered. "And if you only help me I will be grateful to you as long as I live."

"Will Frank share your gratitude?" he suggested.

"Perhaps it 's best for Frank too. Anyhow," she added, "I have quite decided not to marry him. Oh, it would never do."

"You wish it would?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"It is entirely out of the question. I shall never marry Frank. You won't do him a scrap of harm. You will render me an immense service."

She drew nearer so that the ribands on her gown touched his coat. Her face wore a

piquantly-wistful expression as she looked pleadingly into his eyes. Tears hung on her lashes — as rare as the gems to which Everard may have compared them.

"You are not hard-hearted enough to refuse my poor little prayer," she murmured.

"I don't care to play Frank a shabby trick," he said. "You may change your mind again. He will turn up at twelve to-morrow; why should n't you marry and live happily ever after — "

"Like the nice young persons in some of your stories!" she cried. "Only we should n't live happily. If Frank comes to-morrow, of course it will be horribly unpleasant for me; it won't make an atom of difference to him. It is absurd to pretend the letter is his until he receives it. It is mine, and all I ask you to do is to destroy it."

"The argument does n't lack a certain plausibility," he admitted, "though Frank might not see it. Now, if I felt perfectly certain you were in earnest this time — "

"Indeed I am!" she insisted vehemently.

"Who changes once may change again."

"But I can't change again," she said. "It is impossible — even if I wished."

"How is that?" asked Everard.

"Oh, I wonder whether you are discreet!" she cried.

"I am the most discreet person under the sun," Everard assured her.

"Not that it really matters whether you are or not," she said. "I can't marry Frank for the excellent reason that I am going to marry some one else."

"Then you have two strings to your bow," he answered with a chuckle. "May one ask —"

"Lord Fereday," she explained. "He — he called just after I had sent off my letter this afternoon. It was rather late — he had come from the club. You know what he is. He sat there with his stick to his lips — it might have been sealing-wax."

"Still he parted them to some purpose," Everard hinted.

"I talked cricket and he became very much excited about some match or other. We got on to golf, then to yachting. He began to tell me about a cruise and, quite inadvertently, I happened to say that I should like to be going —"

"I see."

"Don't be horrid," she cried. "Well, then he asked me to — to marry him — you understand."

"Whereupon you said 'yes'!"

"Is there a woman in London who would have said 'no'?" she demanded.

"You see, it was n't very long since you had said 'yes' to Frank."

"It 's to your advantage, too," Susannah cried abruptly. "Mrs. Wingood-Smyth has been doing all she knows to capture Lord Fereday for Elsa Treherne."

"Elsa would have had a word to say," he suggested.

"No doubt it would have been 'yes.' It is only natural you should enjoy playing the dog in the manger. You can't marry the girl yourself."

"It does n't look much like it," he said, flushing quickly.

"Still, it can't fail to be pleasant to spoil anybody else, and you must admit that Lord Fereday was in the first flight."

"Only you have changed all that!"

"If you will help me," Susannah answered.

Everard looked at her as if she were an interesting "study."

"Does n't it feel rather strange to be mixed up with the pair of them?" he asked.

"It feels extremely uncomfortable," she confessed.

"You can hardly have conceived the idea of intercepting Frank's letter when you accepted Fereday," he said. "A little risky — was n't it?"

"I have promised definitely to be Lord Fereday's wife," she insisted. "But to Frank I have merely written suggesting he should call — "

"But does n't that imply — "

"I shall have to explain that I preferred to speak to him personally."

"Still," said Everard, "it may prove embarrassing. Frank won't yield without an effort."

"That is what I am asking you to save me from," she retorted. "Nothing else. If Frank does not receive my letter he will accept the tacit refusal. I shall not marry him in any event."

"Then what you said about your lack of courage and so forth," Everard asked, "was mere leather and prunella?"

"I hoped you would be more tractable," she said. "Most men would have been, but of course there is Elsa Treherne! Now," she added, resting a hand on his sleeve, "be a dear man and please me!"

"Well," he answered reflectively, "it does n't seem that it can make a scrap of difference to Frank."

"You will destroy my letter?" she cried eagerly.

"Yes, I will do my best."

"It is impossible there can be any difficulty," she answered.

"What time shall I come to report progress?" he asked.

"About a quarter to twelve. I expect Lord Fereday in the afternoon."

"Good-night," said Everard.

"Good-bye and thanks ever so much. Are you going on to Lady Carstairs'?"

"Yes," he answered, "I thought of it."

"I 'm afraid I have made you late. Good-night," said Susannah.

CHAPTER II

On leaving Mrs. Murchison's flat, Everard took a hansom to Park Lane and at midnight was waltzing round Lady Carstairs' crowded room with Elsa Treherne.

She was very obviously a maiden verging on womanhood. Her appearance was characterised by the delightful freshness of adolescence. Perfect innocence assuredly shone in Elsa's gray eyes! Though her hair was fair as flax, her eyebrows were disproportionately dark, and her lashes a deep brown colour; but her complexion was immaculate. Her face was nearly round, her nose slightly tip-tilted; and being an inch taller than her sex's average, the slimness of her figure might have been regarded as her chief defect if her small bust had not seemed entirely in accordance with the almost childlike quality of her face.

"You were late," she said, as Everard steered her skilfully amongst the dancers. "I had almost given you up."

"You knew that I should not stay away for a trifle," he answered.

"It was a little difficult to keep you a dance," she said.

"Still, you succeeded —"

"I 'm not sure I will make the attempt another time."

"Don't you think it was worth while?" he whispered.

"It causes friction," she said.

"By-the-bye," Everard asked, "how is Mrs. Wingood-Smyth?"

"Oh, she is rather put out."

"Is the cause very serious?"

"Lord Fereday promised to come to-night. If he had," Elsa added, "you would n't have had a dance."

"Then I have stepped into Fereday's shoes?"

"I was ordered to keep two waltzes for him."

"How nice of Mrs. Wingood-Smyth," he said. "Then there will be another for me."

"Not if he comes."

"I don't fancy he will."

"Have you seen him?" asked Elsa.

"I have been very near the rose," said Everard.

"Whose was the garden?"

"Mrs. Murchison's."

"Then that is why you were late!" she exclaimed petulantly.

"She is n't a favourite!" Everard suggested.

"I neither like Mrs. Murchison nor dislike her. I am absolutely indifferent."

"You 'll admit," he said provokingly, "that she 's rather pretty."

"Oh, if one admires that style — "

"A good many women don't," he suggested drily.

"And," said Elsa, "I suppose a good many men do!"

"I can give you some news about her," Everard returned, as they came to a standstill, "if you care to hear it."

"Oh, please do. It will serve to entertain my aunt on the drive home."

"I am not at all sure she will be gratified," he said, looking into Elsa's face.

"You are trying to arouse an adventitious interest," she retorted. "Suppose you tell me."

"Impossible in this crowd. Let's go into the conservatory," he suggested.

It was a large conservatory decorated with palms and flowers and many-coloured lanterns. There were numerous secluded nooks, in one of which Elsa sat down.

"I am engaged for the next dance," she said. "My partner will never be able to find me."

"One man's gain is another's loss," he answered; "it is a law of nature."

"But pray why should another man suffer for you?" she asked.

"My turn is coming. This is my summer and I am singing all the day—"

"Nobody would accuse you of anticipating the winter!"

"How little we really understand our dearest friends!" he said, with a laugh.

"And are you my—"

"I hope so," he answered. "Do you remember the jolly old days at Oakchester?"

"Oh, don't—don't—don't!" she pleaded.

"The first time I saw you—how long ago was it?" Everard asked, leaning eagerly forward.

"Oh, it was in another age!"

"It seems rather like it, doesn't it?" he said. "They had different manners and customs in that age. It must be four years ago."

"The year before my mother died," she said, lowering her eyes.

"How distinctly I can see you!" he continued. "Do you recollect the frosty morning—the scent of the pines as we rode to cover by the edge of the wood? You on your pony—"

"I protest it was a horse!" she said. "And he

threw me in the ditch that morning. You caught him and held the bridle while I remounted. You used to be quite nice to me — when I was a child."

"I foresaw the woman that was to be. Though," he added, "you are scarcely a woman yet. How keen your father used to be. How proud of you, too!"

"Yet I was his chief disappointment," she said. "If I had been a boy —"

"I am tremendously glad you were not!" cried Everard.

"It is almost impossible to realise that he has been dead a year," she murmured. "But we won't talk about it," she added in a livelier tone. "And you have n't told me this news about your friend Mrs. Murchison."

"She is going to be married."

"Mrs. Murchison!"

"Why not?" Everard asked.

"There 's no reason of course, only I did n't think she was the sort of woman —"

"The fault is common to the race," he said.

"Is she going to marry your cousin?" Elsa inquired.

"Now," he returned, "that never occurred to me."

"Men are generally rather blind."

"I suppose," he suggested, "the subject runs less in their minds."

"Does it never enter yours? It is n't Mr. Rothesay then?"

"It 's Fereday."

"Lord Fereday!" she exclaimed, flushing quickly. "Who told you?"

"I have it on the best authority," he said.

"Mrs. Murchison confides in you!" she answered, opening and closing her fan.

"Do you think she is to be envied?" he asked quietly.

"Lord Fereday is — is rather nice," she admitted. "Of course everybody can't be a genius."

"Besides," Everard retorted, "from the marital point of view, geniuses are rather at a discount. You like Fereday then?"

"Yes, I like him."

"Without much enthusiasm?"

"Perhaps that is my own fault," she said.

"I fancy you are capable of enthusiasm," he replied. "Only you require a worthy object."

"Ah, it is difficult to find one!"

"I could direct you," said Everard, "and you would n't have far to search. "You see," he continued, "this affair of Fereday's clea[illegible] the air.

There's one fewer, though, after all, it does n't make much difference. It seems to be a case of one down and the other come on."

"Please take me back," Elsa asked him. "I shall miss my dance."

"The mischief's nearly done," he protested, coolly. "I am sure you don't mind. You can't really care for this kind of thing."

"I have already asked you to take me out of it," she said demurely.

"You are at it night after night," he went on. "Does n't it begin to pall upon the fancy?"

"How *blasé* that sounds! I want to shut my eyes. Your face spoils the effect."

"But," he urged, "would n't you a thousand times rather be back at Oakchester? You can picture the place just now: the woods carpeted with blue-bells, the larches —"

"I never enjoyed myself so much as since I came to London," she insisted. "Everybody is very nice. I think it is delightful."

"They all think that at first," he said.

"Of course," she admitted, "it is a case of sour grapes. I could not return to Oakchester if I would."

"And you would not if you could?"

"I think I should find it a little slow," she

answered. "I should not care to live in the country again all the year through."

"You need not unless you please," he said. "You are in the happy position of one who can pursue her own ideal."

"Does that," she asked, "imply that you are not?"

"I think you understand," he returned quietly.

"Besides," she said, "you don't know what my ideal is."

"You have told me. Rings on her fingers, bells on her toes; she shall have music —"

"Yes," she cried, "I love music."

"Sometimes it happens to be in a minor key," he said.

"It appears to have that tendency to-night," she answered, rising. "But please don't begin to moralise. Take me back to my aunt."

He offered his arm, and led her into the ball-room. As they stood waiting for an opportunity to cross its thronged floor, Elsa's partner approached, protesting that he had been seeking her everywhere. When she began to dance, Everard drew near to Mrs. Wingood-Smyth, who received him none the less cordially because he was a thorn in her flesh.

Having succeeded in providing her two daugh-

ters with husbands, Mrs. Wingood-Smyth was now looking after her sister's only child. The late Mr. Treherne, while constantly declaring his intention to make some kind of provision for Elsa, had not begun at the time of his sudden death, when his estate passed in tail male to a distant relation, and his daughter into the care of her aunt. To Mrs. Wingood-Smyth this was a matter of duty rather than a labour of love.

At fifty she was still ardently devoted to sport, and spent a considerable portion of her time with one or the other of her daughters in order to devote her resources more completely to the winter months in the shires.

A tall woman, she had retained a slender figure; her features were straight and regular, her florid face contrasted somewhat strikingly with her profusion of white hair. Her voice was low and agreeable, but the briskness of her manner seemed occasionally excessive, like a cold plunge on a winter's morning.

She took Elsa in hand a little too completely, and while the young girl's sentence had not been pronounced in so many words, Elsa knew, and others besides Elsa, that Mrs. Wingood-Smyth had concentrated her efforts in the hope of despatching the business in one London season. A

small, furnished house was taken in South Audley Street, a carriage hired, dressmakers and milliners were called to her aid, and she congratulated herself that Elsa was nice-looking in a style which is generally attractive to men.

An obstacle quickly appeared in Everard Rothesay, the kind of young man to be dreaded by mothers of marriageable girls. A favourite of the late Mr. Treherne's, he had seen a good deal of Elsa in those impressionable days when her hair was turned up and her skirts were lengthened.

Having lost sight of her since her father's death, he seized the earliest opportunity of calling on Mrs. Wingood-Smyth after her arrival in London, and was at present staying with his cousin Frank in Jermyn Street, because his own rooms near Hampstead Heath were a little inaccessible in the early hours of the morning.

Mrs. Wingood-Smyth entertained no personal antipathy towards Everard; on the contrary she was quite disposed to like him, only wishing that he lived in the other hemisphere.

"I thought you were not coming to-night," she said, as he sat down by her side.

"I was determined not to disappoint you," he answered, and their eyes meeting, they both smiled like antagonists of good breeding.

"How is Mrs. Rothesay?" asked Mrs. Wingood-Smyth.

"I am afraid she is dying this time."

"How is it," she said, "that your cousin has always been the favourite?"

"You see," Everard explained, "when his father and mother died he went to live with my grandmother. She sent him to Eton and Oxford and all the rest of it."

"One seldom meets him," she said, with a thought of Elsa.

"He 's a kind of hermit."

"But I suppose he leaves his cell sometimes?"

"Not very often. He 's too fond of its contents. Frank 's a collector. He 's an awfully clever chap."

"Does he write? Though," she added, "that has long ceased to be a distinction."

"No, he reads," said Everard, rising as he saw Elsa returning with her partner.

It was considerably later when he came again to claim his second waltz.

"I am sure," said Mrs. Wingood-Smyth, "Elsa would be wiser to rest."

"We will only have two or three turns," answered Everard, as he led Elsa away, and, in accordance with his promise, soon sought the conservatory.

"Did you break the news about Fereday?" he asked, when she was seated behind the palms.

"I told you I should save it for the drive home. A diversion is often welcome," Elsa answered.

"Do you always say what you mean, then?" he asked.

"I don't think I ever say what I don't mean."

"Ah, this is your first season, is n't it?"

"Is that intended for sarcasm?" she asked.

"I mean you look as though you had lived in the fresh air all your life."

"I look provincial, in fact!"

"I am afraid I can't explain without a barefaced compliment," he said.

"Would that be unlawful?"

"You are the sweetest woman in the world, Elsa."

"Are you going to Mrs. Blenkinsopp's on Thursday?" she asked, quickly flushing.

"Are you?"

"Oh, yes."

"Then so am I."

"You spoke as though you rather despised that kind of thing," Elsa said.

"Not at all. I am a very tolerant person. I don't despise anything or anybody."

"I suppose," she suggested, "you could go everywhere we go — if you chose."

"I do go to a good many places," he returned. "I daresay I could arrange a few more, if you like."

She made a careless gesture with her fan.

"You are indifferent," he exclaimed.

"I did n't say so."

"Would you like — "

"Do you really imagine I should say yes! Besides," she added, "it would waste your time — interfere with your work."

"Well, it does that already. Not that it is of vast importance."

"You would n't like anybody else to say that," she suggested.

"I daresay I should n't."

"You may take the world by storm some day," she said.

"If the sky falls we may catch larks," he answered, with a laugh.

"Still, you can't tell what the future may bring forth."

"I am afraid I can," he said. "I think I could tell your fortune."

Looking mischievously into his face, Elsa held forth her right hand.

"I should want the glove off," he whispered.

With a nervous laugh she unbuttoned the long gauntlet and drew off her glove. Taking the tips of her fingers between his own, Everard bent over her palm.

"Well?" she said a minute later.

"I am trying to read between the lines."

"You read very slowly!" she murmured.

"There is some one who loves you," he said, looking up into her eyes.

"They always begin in that way."

"In fact," he continued, "there are several."

"*Embarras de richesses!*"

"Riches have remarkably little to do with one of them," said Everard ruefully. "But he's a most estimable person and you are disposed —"

"Leave the present and penetrate the future, O soothsayer!" she cried.

"One is bound to lead up to it gradually, you know. There is some one who —"

"You said that before."

"Yes, it's a very old story," he replied. "Those lines signify obstacles in the path — rather hard lines, Elsa."

"May I have my hand back, please?"

He looked up into her face again.

"My fee, pretty lady!"

She seemed to raise her hand ever so slightly, and stooping, he pressed his lips on its palm. Then Elsa hastily drew her hand away, her cheeks aflame as she put on her glove.

"Let me fasten it," he said. "There 's a good deal of cussedness about things, is n't there?" he added, fumbling with the buttons.

"Take me back now," she answered gently.

An hour later Elsa followed Mrs. Wingood-Smyth into the brougham. The older woman breathed a deep sigh as the horse started.

"I wonder what prevented Lord Fereday," she said, as they were driven through the silent streets in the dawning.

"Lord Fereday is going to be married," Elsa answered.

"Going to be —"

Mrs. Wingood-Smyth sat bolt upright.

"To Mrs. Murchison," said her niece.

"That dreadful woman!"

"Is she very dreadful?" asked Elsa.

"Of course she has a certain attractiveness. How absurd of Lord Fereday! But then a man who fancies himself in love always is absurd."

"Ah, but —"

"But what?" demanded Mrs. Wingood-Smyth, rather sharply.

"Nothing."

"I suppose you mean that Everard Rothesay is not absurd!"

"Is he in love, then?" asked Elsa quietly.

"He certainly has no business to be. He can't afford it."

"Perhaps some day he may be able to — to indulge in luxuries," Elsa suggested.

"What do you mean by that?" asked her aunt.

"His grandmother is dying. She is immensely rich."

"Pray don't delude yourself," Mrs. Wingood-Smyth interrupted. "I know exactly what will happen. It is quite understood that the whole estate goes to Frank. Everard does n't expect a penny."

"Besides," Elsa insisted, "father used to be very enthusiastic over his poems."

"Of course it 's a matter of taste," said Mrs. Wingood-Smyth. "I tried to read them as he gave me a copy. They 're what I call drivel."

"Some of them are beautiful," answered Elsa dogmatically. "And his novel — "

"I really could n't get through the second chapter."

"The reviews said it was very clever," Elsa insisted. "Besides I know he is clever."

"I can't tell what abstruse subjects Mr. Rothesay discusses with you," said Mrs. Wingood-Smyth drily. "And there 's a kind of cleverness which is its own reward."

"But I don't see why it should be."

"Everybody has to accept a great many things on authority, my dear. It 's rather important you should grasp the fact. I don't mind ruining my health in this way for your sake, and I want you to have a good time. I want you to have a good time all your life. But I hope you are going to be more careful."

"I am going to be immensely careful," said Elsa.

"Oh, how thankful I am to get home," cried Mrs. Wingood-Smyth as the carriage stopped at her door.

CHAPTER III

SUSANNAH looked a little distrait as she sat awaiting Everard Rothesay's arrival at eleven o'clock on Wednesday morning. But this was due less to any doubt as to the success of his attempt or to any fears for the future than to certain troublesome present emergencies. The announcement of her prospective marriage, however, would render her creditors less imperative.

She looked charmingly *petite* in her light morning frock, the more so on account of the slight flush of excitement which tinged her cheeks as half-past eleven drew nearer.

Rising from her chair presently, she threw aside the newspaper and pressing her palms flat against her diminutive waist began to pace back and forth the room. When the door opened, she stopped, holding forth her right hand to Everard.

"A lovely morning," she cried. "I am afraid I have put you out. Of course you work in the morning. All great writers do!"

"Yes," he said with a tantalizing smile, "it is n't a bad sort of day."

He wore a suit of tweeds, and as he spoke placed his felt hat and stick on the table.

"Well," she asked, "did you accomplish that little affair?"

"Oh, yes," he answered cheerfully, "I stole Frank's letter."

"There's no need to put it so brutally," she insisted. "I thought I had convinced you the letter was mine. Anyhow," Susannah added with a sigh, "you have done me a great service. You didn't find much difficulty?"

"The descent to Avernus is proverbially easy," he remarked.

"Did you destroy the letter?" she asked.

"I tore it into a score of pieces and made them into a pyre."

"That was charmingly careful," she cried. "I suppose you rose at an unearthly hour?"

"I intended to, but it didn't quite come off," he answered. "I was rather late at Lady Carstairs'."

"Was it a nice dance?"

"Not at all bad. As it happened I was down quite early enough. I found all the letters on the hall table, took possession of yours, and tore it into minute fragments."

Susannah leaned back in her chair. She drew another sigh.

"I believe you're half sorry!" Everard exclaimed.

"Only for Frank! Oh, it would never have done. You can't conceive him married to a flighty little person like me."

"I think you do protest too much!" he said.

"One may be glad of freedom and yet miss one's fetters!" she retorted.

"But you are not going to —"

As Everard spoke an electric bell rang. The flat being a small one, it was easy to distinguish the voice outside in the hall. He smiled with a boyish kind of glee at the prospect of mischief.

"Frank has taken silence for consent," he said.

"It was expressly understood that it was to be the reverse," she murmured, looking at Everard in consternation.

"That's his voice, anyhow," he said, rising as the door opened.

Frank Rothesay entered, with his hat and stick in one hand, the other outstretched towards Susannah. Observing Everard he looked somewhat surprised.

He was a tall man, standing well over six feet, heavily built, and more than ten years older than

his cousin. Already the fair brown hair was thinning above his forehead, which tended to become more imposing year by year. He was notably handsome, and wore a beard that reached to the middle of his waistcoat.

His presence seemed at once to dominate the room, and Susannah looked tinier than ever by his side. Frank Rothesay had a robust laugh and a strident voice; his manner was rather comprehensive as he took possession of Susannah's hand.

"What a — what a glorious morning!" she cried, with a nervous laugh.

"Really," said Frank, "it is the most lovely day."

"I fancy there 's a storm brewing," exclaimed Everard, with a glance at Susannah.

"Upon my word," Frank continued, "I don't think I remember a more beautiful morning."

"We had been remarking upon it before you came," said Susannah, as Everard took his hat. "Must you go?" she asked, half smiling as she looked into his face.

"I think it 's time," he answered.

She pressed the button of the electric bell and Everard stepped to the door. As it closed behind him Frank drew nearer to Susannah.

"I have n't told Everard yet," he said.

"Told him — told him what?" she asked.

"Need you ask? There 's room for only one idea in my head this morning."

"What is that?" she faltered.

"The immense happiness you have conferred upon me," he said enthusiastically.

"Have — have I?"

"Indeed you have." He took her hands unresisted.

"But it was agreed — I told you — "

"You said that if I heard by this morning's post I might conclude — "

"Yes, but — "

"And," he continued with a beaming face, "when I got your letter — "

She stared up at him blankly.

"To tell you the truth," he said, "I knew no peace till I had it. I took it from the postman's hand myself."

"I — I see," faltered Susannah, entirely at a loss, however.

"I lay awake all the night," he went on. "I think I heard every hour strike. Not that I was anything but hopeful. I did n't imagine you were the kind of girl to — "

"I am not a girl at all," she protested. "I am almost an old woman."

"Your years sit lightly upon you, dear. Though," Frank added, "a few more nights like the last would soon turn me gray. When the postman came — "

"Oh," she cried petulantly, "who would have thought you were so absurdly impatient."

"I 'm a long-suffering fellow as a rule," he answered, "but the circumstances were exceptional. There were a lot of letters, — yours atop. I did n't stay to look at the others. I just planked them down on the hall table, and then — well, I was half afraid to learn my fate."

"I thought you were so hopeful ! " she suggested.

"Still, there was an element of uncertainty," he admitted. "It 's a fact at all events. I stared at that envelope — "

"But you did open it at last ! " she cried, hardly knowing what she said.

"Or I should hardly be here, dear."

"You — you would have accepted the tacit refusal," she said, with a sigh.

"I think so ; you see, I fancied you would know your own mind."

"That did n't seem to be your opinion yesterday," she retorted.

"There was nothing like finality about your manner," Frank said, with a satisfied smile.

"The first words I read this morning were enough — "

"Yet you did n't say a word to Everard ! " she exclaimed.

"One would n't brag about the balance at his bankers to a poor devil with nothing but a hole in his pocket."

"I don't perceive the analogy," Susannah answered.

"You know how it is with him ? "

"Oh, about Elsa Treherne, you mean. But he is only a boy."

"Still, I did n't feel like crying my own happiness whilst he — and I wanted to see you first in any case."

"It is just as well," she said significantly.

"There 's only one person I have breathed a hint to."

"Who was that ? " she demanded.

"My Aunt Alison happened to be in London a day or two ago. I told her what I intended doing — that I hoped you would be my wife."

"I am afraid you made a little too sure," said Susannah.

"I have your letter in my pocket."

"Asking you to come to see me this morning ! "

"But," he said, leaning eagerly towards her, "you can't send me away again."

"You have no idea what I am capable of," she retorted. "When I wrote that letter — "

"You placed your life in my hands, dearest."

"But suppose — suppose I — "

"Yes?" he asked, as she faltered.

"Suppose I tell you that I — that it is all a mistake."

He held her hands and looked down into Susannah's upturned face. Behind his indomitable good-humour, she could perceive an inflexible will, — the iron hand beneath the velvet glove. At the moment, she felt a little afraid of him, and the next, with a short laugh at her protestations, Frank took her in his arms. And to put a stop to any further argument, he kissed her lips. It was at this inconvenient juncture that the door opened and the servant announced, —

"Lord Fereday."

He was a short, sturdily built man, a year or two older than Everard Rothesay, but looking even younger. Without being handsome, he had a pleasant face, profusely freckled, however.

His hair was of a brilliant red colour, and he wore a very small moustache brushed violently away from his lips. He dressed smartly, but in a style which is generally associated with a love of horses.

Lord Fereday had driven to Mrs. Murchison's door this morning with a lugubrious face. On entering her drawing-room, where he was not expected until the afternoon, he stopped a few inches within the door, possessed by a not unnatural desire to retreat. An expression of ludicrous astonishment crossed his face, which was, however, entirely devoid of anger.

As she darted from Frank to greet her guest, Lord Fereday's look of surprise was replaced by an exuberant smile. But Susannah's greeting died on her lips. She looked as happy as one might betwixt the devil and the deep sea. Frank in his turn presented an extremely shamefaced appearance, though his chief regret was for the equivocal situation in which his *fiancée* (as he regarded her) had been discovered. He imagined Fereday telling the story at the club to a number of other spirits worse than himself.

While Susannah stood dumb, and Frank reflected concerning the best method of justifying her position, Fereday seemed to be master of the situation. But his unwonted flow of language was, in truth, a sign of embarrassment.

"Have you heard about 'Simpleton'?" he exclaimed. "He's scratched for all engagements. A regular drop for me. Dixon gave me the tip, you know, and I backed him rather heavily."

"Did — did you?" asked Susannah feebly. But Fereday seemed eager to devote his attention to Frank.

"I had a stroke of luck yesterday," he continued. "I 'm asked to play for the M. C. C."

Frank stood with his feet far apart, staring over Fereday's head. Then he passed his hands one after the other down his fair beard and coughed with the air of a man on the point of making an important announcement.

"I — I have had a stroke of luck, too," he said. "The fact is — I think I ought to explain — " while Susannah looked deprecatingly at Fereday, Frank stepped forward and took her hand. "I want you to congratulate me," he said. "Mrs. Murchison has honoured me by promising to be my wife."

Susannah stood smilingly abstractedly. She glanced from one man to the other, then broke into a nervous laugh which seemed a very little way from tears.

"Upon my word," said Fereday, "I 'm most awfully glad. I am really, you know, Mrs. Murchison." During the short pause that followed they all looked at the carpet. "Shall you be at Mrs. Blenkinsopp's to-morrow?" Fereday asked, turning abruptly on Frank.

"Oh, that kind of thing 's rather out of my line," was the answer.

"He 'll have to alter all that, won't he?" cried Fereday. "I thought I 'd just tell you about 'Simpleton,' you know. Good-bye, Mrs. Murchison. Good-bye, Rothesay. I really am most awfully glad."

As soon as he had gone, Frank turned to Susannah.

"Did he think his news would interest you?" he asked.

"Oh, he 's dreadful!" she said. "He will gossip like any old woman."

"That 's why I told him. After all, it 's the kind of thing one could hardly keep secret."

"What kind of thing?" she demanded.

"The little arrangement I announced to Fereday."

"We have not made any arrangement."

"I fancy we have settled the preliminaries," he answered with a laugh.

"You took a mean advantage of the situation," she insisted. "We had settled nothing. You placed me in an extremely unpleasant — "

"I hope it was n't very distasteful," he said. "Because, it 's the sort of thing one has to expect."

"Indeed I expected nothing of the kind, Mr. Rothesay."

"Mr. Rothesay!" he expostulated.

Turning her back towards him, Susannah rested one foot on the fender and a hand on the mantelpiece. There were tears in her eyes as she looked in the mirror. But there she caught the reflection of Frank's handsome face, happily confident, with a gleam of amusement in the pale-blue eyes. With an impulsive gesture, a laugh at her own expense, Susannah faced him.

"Frank, then!" she said half petulantly and held forth her hands.

"My dear little Susannah!" he cried rapturously, grasping them.

"Is n't it an awful name?" she returned. "And I don't possess another — except my surname."

"That we 're going to change," said Frank.

"Oh, bye and bye, I suppose," she replied. "But now I am going to send you away. My head aches."

"I shall come this afternoon."

"Please not."

"This evening then?" he suggested.

"To-morrow. I must be allowed a little breathing-time. Come at twelve to-morrow, if you like. And of course you must go to Mrs. Blenkinsopp's in the evening."

"But I never go anywhere!"

"I insist," she said.

"What a sweet little termagant you could be," he cried. "You have made me tremendously happy, anyhow."

"Have I?"

"And you?" he asked.

"I suppose I can't say 'no.' Oh," she exclaimed, resting her head against his beard with a sigh, "I think it's fate, and I'm awfully superstitious."

"Then," he asked, "why did you hesitate yesterday?"

"Because I — well, I was just a wee bit frightened," she said.

"Am I very terrifying?"

"Oh, you're the dearest man, only — "

"Well?" he suggested.

"You are likely to expect a great deal — and to be immensely disappointed."

"It's a very little thing I wanted," he said, "and I have got it. Confess," he added, "you intended to come to me from the first."

"Perhaps I did," she returned. "I tell you it was fate. There was no resisting it."

When he went away Susannah sat down and tried to reflect. But this mood did not last long.

Pushing back the loosely dressed hair from her forehead, she rose with the manner of one casting a disagreeable subject aside and went to luncheon. She dawdled over the meal and had not long finished it before she heard that Everard was in the drawing-room.

"I came rather early," he said as she entered, "to make sure of finding you alone."

"Oh, I expected you," she answered. "Certainly you owe me something of an explanation. Oh, how stupid you were!" she exclaimed vehemently.

"Stupid!" echoed Everard, regarding her with complete astonishment.

"You told me that you destroyed my letter," she cried.

"So I did," he answered.

"It is in Frank's possession at the present moment, anyhow," she said, sitting down.

"In Frank's possession! I took it from the hall table and tore it into a score of pieces."

"Oh, yes," she said, tapping the carpet petulantly with her slipper, "and you burned them and all the rest of it. Only, you perceive the letter did n't happen to be mine."

"But it was the only envelope addressed by a woman," Everard insisted.

"You were a day after the affair, Mr. Rothesay. Frank anticipated you. He was waiting on the doorstep for the postman."

"Then," demanded Everard, "whose letter have I destroyed, in heaven's name?"

"Oh, what is the use of asking me such a question?" she retorted. "Could anything be more intensely provoking! How I wish I had not asked you to interfere!"

"So do I," he said, with a good deal of fervour.

"Or else," she continued, "that I had told you to bring the letter to me. It was far too delicate a task for a man."

"I wish to goodness I knew whose letter —"

"You will have to languish in uncertainty. You are never likely to know," she said.

"One can't feel sure," he returned. "It was addressed by a woman — a big upright hand just like yours. As it was the only one, I did n't hesitate."

"Have n't I the best reason in the world to know you did n't?" she exclaimed wrathfully.

"I suppose," he suggested with a smile, "it was n't very difficult to deal with Frank, anyhow."

"Then you have n't seen him?"

"Not since I left him here. Has anything happened?" Everard inquired.

"A great deal."

"Won't you tell me?" he asked, taking a chair.

"After you went away," Susannah explained rather nervously, "Frank began to — you see, he had read my letter — "

"Which merely asked him to call," said Everard, looking significantly into her face.

"But he persisted in taking things for granted."

"I warned you he was not to be disposed of without a struggle."

"And," she continued, "just when I was mustering sufficient courage to — to explain, he — he — "

Susannah paused, looking at Everard with a pout on her lips.

"I think I understand," he said.

"Then Lord Fereday came — "

"The plot thickens!" cried Everard, with a boyish kind of glee.

"Of course I did not expect him till the afternoon. He said he should come at four, so I had n't given any orders. He was shown in here — at the most inopportune moment. He saw — it was a little embarrassing — and Frank calmly suggested he should congratulate me. Lord Fereday! who the night before — Oh," cried Susannah, "it was too dreadful!"

"Yes," said Everard, "a rather awkward situation. How did you get out of it?"

"How could I?"

"Well, I can't quite imagine."

"I simply did nothing. I completely lost my head," said Susannah. "I was never in such an awful position in my life. I stood there like an idiot. I did n't know whether I should laugh or cry."

"Far better to take it laughing," he suggested.

"Of course, I saw at once —"

"That it was all over with Fereday?"

"I am sure," cried Susannah, rising impulsively, "I don't know why I talk about it to a boy like you. Lord Fereday behaved very well. At least —"

"Did n't he take it sufficiently to heart?" asked Everard.

"I don't understand him," she admitted. "He came here last night and — you know — he asked me to marry him. This morning he saw — yet he seemed — he laughed it off. Of course, a word from him —"

"Would have brought you to the ground between two — two stools," said Everard. "But, after all, you wanted to get rid of Frank, you know. There never was so ill-matched a pair! Oh, it would never do!"

He stood looking down with an amused expression into her face, and after a short silence, she answered with a kind of desperation.

"I did n't want to get rid of Frank."

"But you had had your choice of evils," Everard urged. "And after exercising it, you were prepared to do almost anything to get back your letter."

"Oh," she cried, "that was last night."

"When Frank was outbidden."

"You think it was a question of money, then?" she cried hastily.

"Well, I had a suspicion —"

"You were quite mistaken."

"The title —" he suggested.

"That was a temptation," she assented. "You can hardly realise — but you know the kind of reputation I have managed to acquire!"

"You should n't listen to the voice of envy," he said deprecatingly.

"It 's a little insistent," she returned. "I don't know what I 've done to earn it. Perhaps, it 's because I live without a watchdog and I 'm not very old or — or quite plain. But there it is! Men come here, their wives stay away —"

"But they invite you to their houses!"

"Whenever there 's a crowd. But," she said,

"you know all about it, though you pretend you don't. If you mention my name, women lift their eyebrows. I don't know why, but they do. Oh, I have no illusions! As to Frank, he 's the dearest man—"

"Yet you—"

"I know I was horrid. Of course I knew that all the time. I did n't do it because I liked it. But Lord Fereday's wife will have the world at her feet. Oh, how I should have enjoyed the triumph! But when Frank told him—you won't believe me—"

"You made a virtue of necessity," Everard suggested.

"Why do you speak like that?" she demanded. "When Frank asked me to be his wife yesterday, I hesitated because I thought he was too good for me. Of course, he thinks he understands the kind of woman I am, but he has n't the remotest notion. How could he have! A dear old recluse! Then I threw caution to the winds and wrote."

"After which—enter Fereday!" said Everard.

"The temptation was irresistible. He seemed to open a new world to me. I acted detestably, of course."

"I confess," Everard answered, "I don't quite understand."

"You would have to understand a woman. No man ever does that."

"You like to pose as incomprehensible," he retorted. "No doubt there 's an occasional justification. But first you accept one man; within an hour another comes to woo; finally because of —"

"Your clumsiness!"

"You reconcile yourself to the first. I suppose that 's how it will end," said Everard.

"I hate a man who harps constantly on one string!" Susannah exclaimed.

"I am glad you don't regret my mistake, anyhow."

"I did at first," she answered. "When I saw Fereday walk in this morning — Oh, I could have screamed with vexation. But when the mischief was actually done and Frank told him —"

"You adapted yourself to circumstances," he suggested.

"I was glad," she said quietly.

"Well," he remarked, "I wish I knew whose letter I destroyed."

"I don't imagine it was anything very important."

"One can't tell. Perhaps," he added, "the best way will be to make a clean breast of it."

"What do you mean?" Susannah demanded.

"It may save bother to tell Frank."

"Tell him I asked you to intercept — "

"No, no. Of course your name would not be mentioned," he assured her. "It isn't likely I should do that. But there 's the fact: I have torn up a letter of his."

"Letters often get lost," she urged.

"But this one was n't lost, you see."

"If it is ever missed," she continued, "Frank will suppose — "

"I 'm afraid," said Everard, "you don't grasp the idea. It is n't what Frank supposes that I care about. I am thinking of my own share in the transaction."

"Of course. How egotistical men always are. It was most likely a circular or something. What could any woman want to write to Frank about? I want you to promise not to say a word," she pleaded. "You can't tell him the truth. Let the thing rest. Nobody but you has the slightest idea that Lord Fereday — "

"Well — " Everard looked down at her anxious little face.

"You have not told anybody?" she exclaimed.

"You see," he answered apologetically, "I did n't look upon it as a secret. You insisted you were going to marry the man."

"Whom did you tell?" she demanded.

"I met Elsa Treherne at Lady Carstairs' last night," he said.

"And by this time the news is half over London!"

"I 'm afraid she will have told Mrs. Wingood-Smyth," he admitted. "But there has n't been much time — I will go to South Audley Street — "

"How nobly unselfish of you!" cried Susannah.

"By-the-bye," he said, taking his hat, "I have not really congratulated you."

"There will be no need, if this reaches Frank's ears!"

"Oh, I hope it won't," he answered. "I wish," he added, "I knew who wrote that letter. I feel as though I had committed a crime."

"Nonsense, it was only a blunder."

"They say that 's worse," said Everard, ruefully.

"What shall you tell Mrs. Wingood-Smyth?" Susannah asked, offering her hand.

"I must get out of it as neatly as I can."

"There 's a dear boy. We are to be cousins, you know; at least — "

"I shall see you at Mrs. Blenkinsopp's to-morrow," he said, as he left her.

CHAPTER IV

WHILE Everard Rothesay was discussing the affair in which he and Susannah were mutually interested, Mrs. Wingood-Smyth was "at home" at South Audley Street.

The drawing-room was long and narrow, rather bare, and faded. The owner of the house, on letting it for the season, had removed her most valuable and fragile ornaments, while the tenant had not taken the trouble to supply their place.

Not without reason, she regarded Elsa as a sufficient attraction. As usual Elsa was simply but charmingly dressed: Mrs. Wingood-Smyth took care of that. It was, in truth, by nature of an investment, and it could not be denied that the result proved immediately satisfactory.

Afternoon tea was arranged on a small table near the grand pianoforte, and Elsa always presided. Nobody had come as yet this afternoon, and Mrs. Wingood-Smyth was reading the "Field" when Lord Fereday entered.

Always showing a beaming face, to-day he looked like a man who had come into some great and unexpected good fortune. He wore a light-gray frock coat with an orchid in its buttonhole, and carried a remarkably glossy hat.

"I was awfully sorry I could n't turn up at Lady Carstairs' last night," he said, taking Mrs. Wingood-Smyth's hand. "I was really most awfully sorry."

"We were naturally disappointed," she answered, as he turned to Elsa, "but of course — "

"Upon my word, I could n't help it," he said, sitting down close to the tea-table.

"I hear we have to congratulate you," Mrs. Wingood-Smyth remarked, trying to look pleased.

"Oh, you 've heard, then ! "

"Now, Lord Fereday, do you imagine it could be kept secret? "

"Things do get talked about, of course," he owned, with a beaming smile.

"An event of so much importance ! " she said.

"Yes," he explained, "it 's the first time I 've ever had the chance. I would n't be out of it for anything."

Mrs. Wingood-Smyth glanced at Elsa, who demurely lowered her eyes.

"Who told you? " Fereday inquired.

"Everard Rothesay."

"Ah, of course," said Fereday, "he got it from his cousin. I happened to — to see Frank Rothesay. It's awfully lucky, is n't it, Miss Treherne?"

"I hope you will be very happy," she answered.

He seemed a little surprised.

"I 'm bound to feel a bit nervous at the first going off," he said. "It's always the way with me. Once I get set I can score."

"I am sure Mrs. Murchison is very charming," returned his hostess, raising her eyebrows.

"Oh — ah — yes," he said, with an appearance of embarrassment. His face became as red as his hair, and he added hastily, "It 's a first-class match, you know."

"When is it likely to take place?" asked Mrs. Wingood-Smyth.

"The latter end of next week."

"So soon!" she exclaimed.

"I do wish you could see it," he continued, turning to Elsa. "I had no idea you would have heard —"

"Everard Rothesay told me at Lady Carstairs' last night," she said.

"Last night?" cried Fereday.

"No wonder you played truant," said Mrs. Wingood-Smyth.

"But," he explained, looking rather bewildered, "I only got the invitation yesterday."

"The invitation!"

"It was only this morning I told Rothesay."

"Really," said Mrs. Wingood-Smyth, a little impatiently, "I fancy we are talking of different things."

"I was talking about the match," he answered, "I 'm asked to play for the M. C. C."

"And I," said his hostess, "was offering my congratulations upon your approaching marriage."

Lord Fereday shifted his position uneasily. He looked into the lining of his hat, then stole a swift glance at Elsa, finally meeting Mrs. Wingood-Smyth's questioning gaze.

"I 'm afraid there 's — there 's a mistake, don't you know," he said coldly.

"Oh, if I am too previous, I am sure I 'm very sorry."

"If you would n't mind telling me who — "

"I certainly heard you were going to marry Mrs. Murchison," said Mrs. Wingood-Smyth. She looked at her niece.

"Mr. Rothesay told me that Mrs. Murchison was going to be married," Elsa suggested.

"So she is," answered Fereday. "She 's going to marry Frank Rothesay."

"But — "

"Rothesay told me himself only a few hours ago," said Fereday promptly. "I congratulated them both."

As he spoke the door opened. The butler (hired with the house for the season) announced: "Mrs. Harrington," — a fussy little woman, who greeted Mrs. Wingood-Smyth with a good deal of energy. Presently Lord Fereday seized an opportunity to draw closer to Elsa. He lowered his voice almost to a whisper.

"Odd, that we should have been at cross-purposes like that, was n't it?" he asked, leaning forward towards her.

"Very," she returned.

"Was n't it a curious kind of mistake to make?" he suggested.

"I wonder who made it?" she said.

"I 'm sure you did n't believe it."

"Certainly I did," answered Elsa. "Why should I disbelieve it?"

"Oh, well, I hoped you might."

"Mr. Rothesay would hardly invent such a report," she said. "Besides, there was nothing in the least improbable about it."

"Don't you think there was?" he asked, looking extremely worried.

"Anything improbable in the idea of your marrying?"

"You see it takes two to make a marriage."

"Like a quarrel," she said with a laugh.

"And," he continued, "if I was one, I — well, I would rather that — that some one else was the other."

"That sounds a little vague," she returned. "I suppose," she added, "you are very pleased about your cricket match."

"Oh, yes, of course, but — "

"Are you going to Mrs. Blenkinsopp's to-morrow?" she inquired.

"I would n't miss it on any account."

"You missed Lady Carstairs' last night!"

"Yes, I — "

"You were otherwise engaged," she suggested.

"It 's most tremendously annoying," said Fereday.

"What is?"

"The whole thing from beginning to end," he answered. "I hoped — "

"What did you hope?"

"I hoped you would n't believe it."

"Although it is true."

"You see," he urged, "she can't marry the pair of us."

"Certainly not."

"And she 's going to marry Rothesay."

"Last night," said Elsa, "Everard told me explicitly she was not."

"It 's such an awfully difficult thing to explain," he muttered.

"I am sure it must be. It sounds quite sensational. You can't imagine how curious I feel! Last night Mrs. Murchison was going to marry you. This afternoon you tell us you have congratulated Mr. Rothesay. It is quite bewildering," she said, looking at him with dancing eyes.

"I do wish I could make you understand," he sighed.

"You 'll admit the fault is hardly my obtuseness," she retorted. "Not that it is of the remotest consequence, of course."

"I hope it is," he said gloomily.

"Of importance to me whom Mrs. Murchison marries!"

"Oh, well," he answered, "I was n't thinking about Mrs. Murchison."

In a rather abstracted manner he rose and bade Mrs. Wingood-Smyth good-bye, parting with Elsa as though he carried away a very heavy burthen.

As the door closed Mrs. Wingood-Smyth turned to her companion.

"It was extremely embarrassing," she said. "Lord Fereday sat there saying the absurdest things."

"What a strange mistake for Mr. Rothesay to make," answered Mrs. Harrington.

"Of course," said her hostess, "he is a romancer by profession."

Elsa flushed vividly.

"I don't think it was a mistake," she cried.

"I always say," Mrs. Harrington remarked, "that there is generally some foundation for every story."

"Still," said Mrs. Wingood-Smyth, "if any one ought to know, I suppose it's Lord Fereday!"

"And Mrs. Murchison," added Elsa.

"Who is going to marry Frank Rothesay, my dear!" cried her aunt triumphantly.

Mrs. Harrington had scarcely driven away from the door before Everard reached it. He entered the room in his usual cheerful manner, and came blithely towards Mrs. Wingood-Smyth.

"You have just missed Lord Fereday," she said with a significant smile.

"I am sorry I didn't forestall him," answered Everard.

"You succeeded in placing us in a rather embarrassing position, Mr. Rothesay."

"I 'm afraid I must have done," he said, taking Elsa's hand. "I made an unfortunate mistake."

"Do you often make that kind of mistake?" asked Mrs. Wingood-Smyth.

"It would n't do very often, would it?" he said lightly.

"It is a little uncomfortable for your friends," she retorted.

"Lord Fereday says that Mrs. Murchison is going to marry your cousin," said Elsa.

"That is quite right."

"So you made a mistake in the name," Mrs. Wingood-Smyth suggested.

"I am afraid I did. I wish I had been here in time."

"Yes," said his hostess, "it is rather late. Elsa, Mr. Rothesay will excuse you."

Elsa looked surprised for a moment, then offered her hand and walked to the door. As Everard closed it behind her Mrs. Wingood-Smyth said:

"I am afraid the wish was father to that thought, Mr. Rothesay."

"To which thought?" he asked, sitting down.

"Of Lord Fereday's —"

"Oh, I don't wish the man any harm," he answered carelessly.

"Then you regard marriage as an evil?"

"It is no use pretending to you that I don't think it might be very much the reverse," he said.

"But quite outside the sphere of practical politics," she hinted.

"You are kind enough to allude to myself?"

"I am not sure you will think it kindness," she said with a smile. "But whether you do or not —"

"Is a matter of profound indifference?"

"No, no, why should we put things unpleasantly? Naturally a young man of your craft — writing such charming stories — delightful verses, too — must take a comprehensive view of life."

"See it steadily and see it whole," Everard suggested.

"Precisely. I gave you credit for no desire to spoil sport."

"Still," he said, "you can hardly expect the quarry to enjoy the chase."

"I am not at all sure about that," she murmured.

He laughed sceptically.

"A little practical experience would prove very convincing."

"Practical matters are quite what I want to discuss," she said. "You are an old acquaintance of Elsa's —"

"I think I may almost claim to be a friend."

"Of course," Mrs. Wingood-Smyth continued, "my niece is a charming girl. If her father had been a little more — "

"Mr. Treherne, also, was a friend of mine," said Everard.

"If it comes to that," she retorted, "he was my brother-in-law."

"It 's not always the same thing."

"At all events," she said, "I daresay you have some kind of idea of the circumstances in which he left his daughter. You were frequently at his place, you know the sort of life Elsa has been accustomed to. I have come to London at immense inconvenience. Late hours don't suit me. I am ruining my health, for one express purpose."

"I think I understand," answered Everard.

"And I consider I have a perfect right to ask you not to stand in the girl's light."

"Do I stand in her light?" he asked.

"She has had three excellent offers of marriage already."

"Then, obviously, I don't entirely overshadow her!"

"She has unfortunately refused them all. Now," Mrs. Wingood-Smyth added, "I daresay you think me mercenary and all the rest of it. But the

facts are plain. It is only natural Elsa should make a good marriage. She is quite old enough, and with the best wishes in the world I can't have her with me next year. I want to ask you frankly whether you intend — "

"Don't you think that is a little tantalising?" said Everard.

"Because, if not, you must admit it is your plain duty to keep out of the way."

"Do you mean that I am not to see her at all?" he asked.

"Certainly. If you admit you cannot marry her — I don't wish to ask impertinent questions, but now what is your income, Mr. Rothesay?"

Everard stared down at the faded carpet. His forehead was full of wrinkles and he looked preternaturally solemn. Then he raised his eyes frankly to Mrs. Wingood-Smyth's face.

"To tell you the truth," he said, "I — I don't quite know."

"You don't know the amount of your income!"

"Of course," he explained, "there's a small sum settled on me, — my modest patrimony, you know, and now and then I get cheques from editors — "

"Am I right in assuming it is altogether less than 500 a year?" she asked.

"Oh, perfectly right," he answered with alacrity.

"And," she suggested, looking as though the information pleased her, "of course you have some debts?"

"I owe a little," he said deprecatingly. "You make one feel rather small," Everard added as he rose. "The fact is I have lived on hope."

"Unfortunately one can't," Mrs. Wingood-Smyth retorted, adding quickly: "you don't mean that you indulge any hopes concerning Mrs. Rothesay?"

"My grandmother! Oh, dear, no. I very seldom see her. It has always been an understood thing that the estate should not be divided, and of course it will go to Frank."

"That is what I thought," she answered. "My only desire was to convince you of the utter impossibility —"

"It was n't necessary," Everard said, "but you have succeeded."

"Then you admit you ought not to —"

"I shall go to Mrs. Blenkinsopp's to-morrow," he exclaimed.

"And after that?"

"The deluge," he replied, taking her proffered hand.

"I think we understand each other," said Mrs. Wingood-Smyth.

CHAPTER V

At Mrs. Blenkinsopp's ball on Thursday evening Frank Rothesay became the object of a good deal of interest. Some persons regarded him as an exceedingly fortunate man, others as a very bold one. Nobody congratulated him more cordially than Mrs. Wingood-Smyth, who, having dealt with Everard, and also found that Fereday remained still unattached, was in a mood to take the most favourable view of things in general.

"You will have a charming bride," she said, in the course of the evening. "How sweet dear Mrs. Murchison looks to-night."

Frank glanced across the room at Susannah, who, as usual, was surrounded by a group of very young men. She looked quite her best, and her best was excellent. It was difficult to believe she was older than twenty-three or twenty-four at the outside. Her rather *décolletée*, pale-yellow dress suited her admirably, and the knowledge conferred on its wearer a pleasant sense of power.

"Yes, I think she does," said Frank, and presently found his way to her side. "I meet congratulations everywhere," he whispered.

"And I —"

"You know," he continued, "I feel rather out of this sort of thing."

"You are far and away the handsomest man in the room," she answered, looking up at his bearded face as she placed her hand on his arm. "And you will have to get used to it."

"Still," he returned, "it is n't my ideal of happiness to watch you dancing with other men."

"Jealous already!" she said with a smile.

"No, I don't think I 'm capable of jealousy."

"That is hardly a compliment."

"Is n't it?" he asked. "I am not sure. But I feel altogether too confident."

"Of what?"

"Exclusive ownership — shall I call it?"

"There is Lord Fereday!" cried Susannah. "How I wish all bad dancers had your excellent discretion."

"Can't you say 'no'?"

"Not very well," she answered.

Fereday had been watching Susannah from the doorway for some time. At first he hesitated whether to approach or to avoid her entirely.

Above all things, however, he did not wish his conduct to call for remark, and finally drew near as Frank walked away with an expression of consummate boredom.

Stopping opposite Susannah, Fereday stood for a moment looking at her in silence; their eyes met, and hers soon began to gleam with amusement. A rather self-conscious smile passed over his face in return.

"I began to wonder," she said, "whether you were going to take any notice of me."

"That was the working of a guilty conscience," he answered. "Will you give me this waltz?"

"I don't feel in the least guilty," said Susannah, taking his arm.

"I was never quite so taken back in my life," he remarked, dragging her about the room.

Susannah laughed quietly.

"I suppose not," she said. "But I think we will cultivate a decent oblivion."

"There's nothing like it," Fereday admitted. "Only, you see, you did n't begin in time."

She insisted on stopping, fearing greater damage to her dress.

"You got me into a hole," he insisted, as they stood watching the other dancers.

"I have no doubt you managed to extricate yourself very cleverly," she retorted.

"Well, I 'm not sure I 'm out of it yet," he replied.

"Suppose we agree that it was all a mistake, Lord Fereday."

"I think it was."

"And say no more about it. I am sure," she added, "you never tell tales out of school."

"I did n't think you would."

"Of course not," Susannah protested.

"But you told young Rothesay."

"Everard? Oh, he is very discreet. Besides, that was before —"

"He passed it on to Mrs. Wingood-Smyth, anyhow," said Fereday. "Mrs. Harrington was there." He felt Susannah's fingers tighten nervously on his arm. "When I called yesterday," he continued, "she began to wish me joy, and all that sort of thing. I thought she was talking about the match. I 'm going to play for the M. C. C., you know."

"What did you say?" asked Susannah.

"I backed out as well as I could. I said you were booked to Rothesay, though, upon my word, I can't understand —"

"That any woman should prefer Frank?"

"No," he said, "I don't mean that at all. Only when I saw —"

"The morning brought reflection," she cried quickly.

"I can understand that part of it," he answered significantly. "Only you see you told young Rothesay — "

"That was Tuesday night."

"Ah, well," he said, "I can't make it out — not that I mind, only — "

"Yes, yes," Susannah returned, "I have no doubt it 's a little beyond you. You really behaved very nicely."

"And you?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"I thought we agreed to forget all about it," she said.

"The worst of it is some people can't," he insisted.

"Elsa Treherne! She looks very fresh and charming to-night. But," Susannah asked, "if that 's the case, why did you — "

"I am busy trying to forget," he protested.

"You see," she said, "you are quite as incomprehensible as I am. Suppose," she added, "you take me to a seat."

Presently Everard approached, but though he was an excellent dancer and she usually welcomed him as a partner, to-night Susannah received him without a smile.

"I saw you waltzing with Fereday," he said.

"Oh," she cried, "I am black and blue, and my dress is torn to ribands."

"Still, you must have had an interesting conversation," Everard suggested as they danced. "And," he said, "your dress looks charming still."

"I don't feel charming."

"How is that?" he asked.

"It is all your fault," she retorted.

"What have I done?"

"Mrs. Wingood-Smyth congratulated Lord Fereday, — out of sheer malice, of course, — and Mrs. Harrington was there, — the most talkative woman in London."

"Unfortunately, I was a little too late."

"It seems to be a habit of yours!" she said.

"Have you heard any inquiries after the missing letter yet?" he asked, steering her skilfully amongst the throng.

"Of course not. You must see Mrs. Harrington," she insisted. "For goodness' sake disillusion her. You must call in Portman Square to-morrow. If the report reaches Frank's ears, I — "

"You would really be deeply afflicted?" he asked.

"Oh, you think I have n't a scrap of feeling," she murmured, as they came to a standstill.

"You have always hidden it very cleverly," he answered, "you are like me."

"A boy like you has no business with feelings or nerves or that sort of thing. Besides, you are not my confessor."

"Heaven forbid!"

"You imagine the poor man would be fully employed! Why have n't you danced with Elsa Treherne?"

"Forbidden fruit," he said dolefully.

"Has it come to that? You see what you might have gained if you had got up earlier yesterday morning."

"Frank would have been there, too," he returned.

"You did n't suppose he would be quite so eager, did you?" she asked with something like a caress in her voice.

"Oh, I don't know that it 's very surprising," he said, glancing down at her.

"Why not?"

"I must n't tell you — now," he answered carelessly.

"Do you imagine I am going to be a slave?"

"You will be fairly well looked after, anyhow."

"Perhaps," she said, "I sha'n't object to that."

"In short," Everard replied, "you 're honestly glad things have turned out as they have done."

"Shall I tell you the truth?"

"By all means!"

"I would not disturb existing arrangements for —"

"A coronet?" he suggested.

"Not for a crown," she said with a laugh. "But don't let us become sentimental, whatever we do. Suppose you put me down near Frank. Does n't he look picturesquely wretched! What an admirable pair Lord Fereday and Miss Treherne make," she added as they passed out to the staircase. "You see each supplies exactly what the other lacks."

Lord Fereday and Elsa sat down on the stairs as Susannah returned to Frank.

"Awfully good dancer, Mrs. Murchison," said Fereday, in the most casual tone, as Susannah swept by.

"Mr. Rothesay evidently thinks so," answered Elsa, declining to meet Everard's eyes.

"You see," Fereday persisted, "Frank Rothesay is here to-night."

"Obviously; he is too large to be overlooked."

"People are congratulating him," said Fereday. "I daresay it seems a little odd to you —"

"That people should felicitate Mr. Rothesay?" she asked.

"Well — after — you know — "

"Oh, you are still engrossed by the mystery of Mrs. Murchison ! "

"It is a mystery to me," he said.

"What is?" she asked provokingly.

"I assure you," he answered, "I was never more dumfoundered than when Mrs. Wingood-Smyth congratulated me."

"You don't care about congratulations?"

"I should n't mind if they were about the right sort of thing."

"Such as the cricket match," Elsa suggested.

"You see," he said, "it 's so immensely difficult to explain."

"If I were you, I should n't trouble myself about it, Lord Fereday."

"But I can't help it," he persisted with an eager face. "I feel so awfully wild when I think of it. Of course, I know it sounds lame, but 'pon my word I wish you understood."

"I don't," she answered, shaking her head with a laugh as the band ceased to play.

As she spoke, Everard approached.

"I think this is my dance," he said, and Elsa turned to her partner.

"Thank you, Lord Fereday. You are rather belated," she added as Fereday walked away and

Everard sat down in his place. "Besides, you can't have the next."

"I am not sure I dare to have one at all," he said.

"Oh, of course if you don't care."

"Didn't Mrs. Wingood-Smyth tell you?" he asked.

"She hasn't told me anything of the remotest importance."

"I thought she might have mentioned an interesting conversation we had yesterday after you —"

"After I was dismissed so ignominiously."

"I suppose you guessed," he suggested.

"Oh, I didn't try," she answered quickly.

"Anyhow, I received my marching orders."

"What does that imply?" she asked.

For an instant her face turned as white as her dress. This, on account of her slenderness, was fashioned almost close to the throat. She looked scarcely more than a child, her extreme fairness suggesting the freshness of some half-opened flower.

"It implies that I go back to Hampstead tomorrow," said Everard with a long face.

"Won't London know you any more?" she asked.

"Not your section of it. I shall make my fare-

well visit at Mrs. Harrington's to-morrow afternoon, then pack up and be off."

"Why at Mrs. Harrington's?"

"She was at South Audley Street yesterday, I hear. You see I have rather made a mess of things," he explained.

"Yes," Elsa said, "Lord Fereday has been lamenting the mud you spattered him with."

"Fereday brings his lamentations to you then?"

"Why not?" she asked, looking down at her fan.

"Oh, there 's no reason of course."

"You seemed to imply that there was," she retorted. "I confess your part seems a little difficult to understand. In fact the whole affair is incomprehensible."

"Suppose we let it slide," he suggested. "Frank 's going to marry the woman and there 's an end o't. Lucky beggar!"

"To marry Mrs. Murchison?"

"It does n't seem to depress you," Everard remarked.

"What do you mean?" Elsa demanded.

"My banishment."

Elsa flushed again. "Absence makes —"

"No," Everard said, leaning forward eagerly, "it could n't do that."

"Of course, I am sorry if this is really to be your last dance," she answered.

"For me or for yourself?" he asked.

"I don't want to be egotistical."

He took possession of her fan and began to open and close it.

"Surely," he said, "you can't look forward to the fate they threaten you with."

"Is it any use quarrelling with fate?" she murmured.

"To become the wife of a man —"

"You must n't speak to me in that way," Elsa interrupted, very gently however. "I have not promised to be any one's wife."

"But you know that Mrs. Wingood-Smyth —"

"Please take me to her," said Elsa, rising impulsively.

"Are you going to give me a dance?" he asked as they crossed the room.

"You said —"

"I must though the heavens fall," he insisted, and having taken her to a seat returned half an hour later.

"I have not had a dance with Miss Treherne yet," he said, meeting Mrs. Wingood-Smyth's eyes.

"I am afraid —"

He leaned forward, lowering his voice.

"It is excellent to have a giant's strength," he said.

"It would be too absurd to call me tyrannous, Mr. Rothesay."

"I am off to Hampstead to-morrow," he answered with a smile as he led Elsa away.

CHAPTER VI

On the day after Mrs. Blenkinsopp's dance, Frank Rothesay entered Susannah's drawing-room about half-past three o'clock. She rose to greet him with both hands outstretched, looking bewitching in a dress entirely white.

But Frank seemed to take her hands perfunctorily; his face looked stolidly obstinate as he sat down opposite to her.

"You are late," she said. "I expected you at three."

"Yes," he answered, "I am a little late." Then there was a short silence. "Everard is off to-night," Frank added.

"Perhaps that accounts for it," she cried with a laugh.

"For what?"

She placed a hand to her chin, lengthening her face.

"Your rueful countenance. Or," she asked, in a different tone, "is it that Mrs. Rothesay is n't so well?"

"She can't be much worse, or I should have been sent for."

"Have n't you seen her?"

"Not since Monday."

"And to-day is Friday," said Susannah. "Is n't that a little neglectful?"

"No," he explained. "Monday is my day. I always go once a week. She can't stand many visitors. I only saw her for five minutes on Monday."

"Then," said Susannah, "Mrs. Rothesay has not heard about — about me. What is the matter to-day? Is Everard's melancholy contagious?"

"I fancy he 's rather hard hit," Frank said.

"Oh, it is n't in the least serious at that age," she retorted.

"A little disgusting to see a girl put up to auction quite so publicly," he suggested.

"It 's no use quarrelling with the inevitable," she said. "Girls and men must be brought together. You can hardly wish Everard to marry her."

"I would n't have her forced to marry any one else."

"Everard is n't quite an impartial authority," she hinted. "I don't think much compulsion is necessary."

"The more I see of women, the more they

perplex me," said Frank, clutching his beard rather fiercely.

"I daresay we do," was the complacent answer.

"I can't understand," he continued, "how any woman who knows — who knows what life is, can tolerate the bare idea of a young girl like Elsa Treherne being deliberately handed over to a man she detests."

"You recognise no mean," she said, "no medium between love and detestation?"

"If a woman doesn't love a man," Frank dogmatised, "the idea of becoming his wife must make her hate him."

"Oh, dear, no! Facts don't support your theory. Lots of girls marry men they don't pretend to love, yet they manage to jog through life — "

"Getting a good many bruises by the way!" said Frank. "Then you see no fault in the arrangement?"

"I never look for faults. I take the world as I find it. A very pleasant world I think. You see, men endow us with all sorts of feelings we don't possess, and which certainly they don't."

"I am afraid I am a little old-fashioned," exclaimed Frank.

"You mustn't find fault with me because I am not," she retorted.

"Oh, I 'm not given to finding fault, only — "

"You have found it," she said rather nervously. "Now tell me what it 's like."

She pressed her palms against her waist as she looked across at his solemn face.

"I saw a man at the club this morning," Frank explained. "I told him — "

"About me?"

"Yes, about you."

"Was he surprised?" she asked.

"He was a little, because he had heard only yesterday you were going to marry Fereday."

"But," said Susannah, quickly, "you were just hinting rather broadly that Lord Fereday wanted to marry Elsa Treherne!"

"Yes, but — "

"And I am going to marry you — at least I thought so five minutes ago."

"I don't pretend to understand it," said Frank, "only it does n't seem to me that life is a Palais Royal Farce."

"Obviously," she retorted, "it is a very serious matter."

"Of course," he persisted. "I am not blind. I know Fereday used to come here — "

"So did scores of men. Are you going to accuse me of an intention to marry them all?"

"It 's rather disagreeable," said Frank, "to hear your name connected with his."

"Disagreeable for me, too," she cried. "But it is surely ridiculous to hold me responsible."

"But still — "

"You believe there 's something in it ! "

"Was there ? " he demanded.

"Do you mean was I affianced to Lord Fereday ? "

"Yes," said Frank, stolidly, "that 's what I mean."

"Then, how do you account for the fact that I promised to be your wife on Wednesday ? " she asked.

He shrugged his shoulders helplessly.

"Did Lord Fereday look like a jilted lover that morning ? " she insisted.

"I don't pretend to understand it," Frank insisted, "I know that a man told me he had heard you were going to marry Fereday — it 's not that I imagine you have spent your life in a convent — "

"I suppose," Susannah suggested, "there is n't a monastery in Jermyn Street ? "

"That 's quite true," he confessed. "But," he added, with considerable warmth, "I tell you candidly, I would sooner hang myself than marry a woman who cared so little — "

"Now what other inducement do you think I had?" she asked calmly. "Try to exercise a little reason. Is it likely I ever entertained such an idea, or that, if I had entertained it, I should have given it up?"

"I wish to goodness," he said, rising, "that I had not heard the report."

She came to his side, resting both hands on his sleeve.

"What can I do to make you forget it?" she exclaimed.

Frank looked down at her upturned face, at the flushed cheeks, the small "rosebud" mouth, half-pouting, the dark, eloquent eyes. Then he snatched her towards him.

"When will you marry me?" he demanded, almost roughly.

"Whenever you like," she said.

"Do you mean that?"

"Of course I mean it. It is the only way I can silence the voice of calumny and bring a man who can't be jealous to his senses."

"I shall take you at your word," said Frank.

"Then you have graciously forgiven me?"

"You say there is nothing to forgive."

"Oh, but that is of no consequence," she retorted, "if you think there is. Now suppose it had been true, — absurd as it is."

"That you had been — "

She nodded slowly.

"Just before you promised to be my wife?" he cried. "But we won't contemplate — "

"The impossible. You must confess it is! Though," she added, "I doubt whether you quite believe me."

"If I did n't," he said, "I should n't have stayed so long."

"I am not sure," she answered significantly.

"You tell me you were not actually— "

"Actually? "

"Well," he said, "I used to meet Fereday here rather often."

"Not oftener than he met you," she exclaimed with a laugh.

"If he drew conclusions from that, he was justified," answered Frank, "but I should n't care to have to draw the same."

Susannah petulantly turned away.

"I don't know what else I can say," she said, and though he was to a degree in her power and it was easy to appeal to his passion, she perceived that he left her only half convinced.

While Susannah was enduring this ordeal, which she had almost anticipated, with Frank, Everard was by way of experiencing a pleasant surprise.

Calling on Mrs. Harrington that afternoon, in accordance with Susannah's request, on entering the drawing-room he saw Elsa.

"I think you know Miss Treherne," said his hostess, and as they shook hands they glanced into each other's eyes and smiled.

Elsa looked remarkably fresh and bright this afternoon; a trace of self-consciousness seemed to heighten her charm. Afraid lest she should depart before his errand was accomplished, Everard plunged into the middle of things.

"Of course," Mrs. Harrington answered, "I saw at once that there was a misunderstanding. And in any case I am not at all the sort of person to chatter."

"Mrs. Murchison," Everard explained again, "is going to marry my cousin Frank."

"I am sure he will have a charming wife," said Mrs. Harrington, in the peculiar tone which many of her sex adopted when speaking of Susannah.

"And," he persisted, "I wanted to tell you that the mistake was entirely mine."

Elsa rose to say good-bye.

"I am to say how sorry my aunt was to find she had not returned the book before," she said, with crimson cheeks.

"To tell you the truth," was the answer, "I had forgotten its existence."

"So had we. It was put away with some of mine and I happened to see it this morning."

"Must you go?" asked Mrs. Harrington, as Everard offered his hand.

He followed Elsa downstairs and out into Portman Square, turning to his right towards Edgware Road. For a few minutes they walked in silence.

"I did n't dare to hope — " he said presently.

"To find Mrs. Harrington at home?" she asked demurely.

"To see you there or anywhere else to-day, Elsa."

"I thought two months quite long enough to keep her book," she explained. "A — a coincidence, was n't it?"

"Enough to convince the most sceptical," he cried. "It was tremendously nice of you," he added, turning to the left towards Park Lane.

"To bring back Mrs. Harrington's book! This is not my nearest way home."

"If it had been I should n't have taken it," he answered. "Though I suppose all roads lead to Rome."

It was a delightful spring afternoon. The grass inside the Park looked fresh and green; the trees were in young leaf; the flower-beds were masses of brilliant colour.

"I have no right to be pursuing this one," Elsa said.

"You are in an indulgent mood to-day."

"I think I must be."

"When I was a small boy," he said, "I used to spend the holidays with some people at Brighton. From the first day they constantly snubbed me and sat upon me."

"No doubt you were a forward boy and needed it," she returned, as they reached Upper Grosvenor Street.

"Still," he urged, "the lash is as painful for the guilty as the innocent. I was about to remark that when the last day came they trotted me about and tipped me, — so enchanted at the prospect of getting rid of me, you know."

"Well!" said Elsa.

"I am going back to Hampstead this evening."

"And to work?" she asked hastily.

"Oh, I shall have a try."

"Will it require an immense effort?"

"You see," he explained, after they had turned

the corner and were nearing South Audley Street, "I am a good deal engrossed by reality just now."

"Is n't that more satisfactory?"

"Than my fictions?" he asked with a laugh. "What do you think?"

"I find them both very pleasant," she said.

"Of course, it depends on the dénoûment — whether it ends happily or not."

"What — what constitutes a happy ending?" Elsa asked quietly.

"And so they married and lived happily ever afterwards."

"Marriage is the sole aim, then?"

"I suppose," Everard said, "that 's about true after all. We 're born, we perpetuate the race and die; so that some of the agreeable women we know, who assume the function of heaven and make marriages, are really engaged in the most important work on earth."

"It sounds rather laboured," she retorted, "and I did n't know you had studied the subject so seriously."

"Don't you think it demands serious study?" he asked.

"One scarcely expects anything serious from you," she said.

"Oh, people have that idea, I know. But

they're lamentably mistaken. I protest, but it doesn't seem much good. And you?" he suggested. "It's no use pretending you haven't thought about it."

"Oh, I have."

"What is the result?" he asked.

"I think," she said, stopping as they reached Grosvenor Square, "I must say good-bye here."

"Goodness knows for how long!" he muttered.

"But you will come into town —"

"Yes, only not in your direction," Everard answered.

"It was very ridiculous of my aunt. I suppose you will call to inquire after Mrs. Rothesay sometimes," she said, turning her head away.

"No," he answered. "I get the news from Frank. She doesn't care to see people."

"People!"

"I am quite an outsider," he insisted. "I haven't seen her twelve times in as many years. She never quite forgave my father."

"Did he do anything very dreadful?"

"Oh, well —"

"At all events," said Elsa, nervously, "I don't believe Mrs. Rothesay will be so unjust as my aunt says."

Her hand rested in his and their eyes met. The next minute Elsa was hastening homewards with a consciousness that she had at last betrayed herself, while Everard walked moodily away in the opposite direction.

CHAPTER VII

WHEN Frank Rothesay saw Susannah on Saturday, he was so urgent about the wedding that she began her preparations forthwith.

With her own modest income, with Frank's paternal inheritance and the estate which might become his own at any hour, Susannah would have almost as much money at command as the wife of Lord Fereday. But the announcement of her marriage to Frank failed to inspire that confidence in her creditors which at the moment would have proved convenient.

"Did you see Mrs. Rothesay yesterday?" she asked on Tuesday.

"I called at the house," he answered, "but she was engaged with her solicitor. She could n't see me. I must go again in a day or two."

She heard no more about Mrs. Rothesay for a few days. On Saturday Frank was to take her to the theatre, and having dined earlier than usual, at half past seven Susannah sat waiting for him.

Her gloves lay on the table by her side; her long, amber-coloured plush cloak was thrown over a chair. Her dress, entirely black, enhanced the whiteness of her shoulders. Rising to look in the mirror, she smiled at her reflection: Frank could hardly fail to be pleased!

As the bell rang, she turned with an impulsive gesture to greet him.

"Have you forgotten the play?" she asked, observing that he wore a frock-coat and light-coloured trousers.

"No," he said gloomily, "I have n't forgotten. I intended to go until the last half-hour. I 'm sorry, but I could not face it."

"Is anything wrong?" asked Susannah rather timidly.

"Yes, I 'm afraid so."

"Mrs. Rothesay is not — "

"I saw her this afternoon," he answered gravely. "There 's no reason why you should stay at home," he added.

"Where thou goest, I will go," she said lightly.

Stooping, he drew her towards him.

"You seem immensely bothered," she added, looking up into his face a few minutes later. "Suppose you sit down and unbosom yourself. You would like to smoke."

"Don't you mind?"

"Oh, I am very domesticated! I like it. I have only my own cigarettes to offer." She took a silver case from the mantelshelf.

"May I light my pipe?" he asked, sitting down. When he brought it and his tobacco pouch from his pocket, Susannah laughingly took possession of them. Going down on her knees beside his chair, she filled the pipe, and insisted on applying the match. After one or two puffs, Frank breathed a deep sigh.

"Shall I tell them to send away the carriage?" she asked.

"Pray don't move," he said. His eyes wandered over her form as she kneeled beside his chair. "Upon my word, I hardly know how to tell you."

"Is it so tragic?"

"It could n't easily be worse from my point of view," he answered.

"Then from mine also," she said.

"You must understand," he explained, "that my grandmother is an eccentric old lady. The fact is I have managed to annoy her."

"In what way?" asked Susannah.

"Oh, there 's no need to enter into details."

"Don't you know," she said, "that every woman loves details!"

"It was a mere fancy, a prejudice," he insisted. "I could easily have explained it away."

"You found your opportunity this afternoon?"

"Unfortunately I did n't," he answered. "It was too late."

"Do you mean that she was too ill?" Susannah inquired. "Was n't she conscious?"

He smoked for a few moments in silence.

"Not exactly unconscious," he said. "In fact she was a long way from that. But she was n't herself."

"Delirious?" Susannah suggested.

"Morbidly excited," he explained. "I have never seen her like it before."

"Had Mrs. Rothesay heard about — about me?" asked Susannah quietly.

"My Aunt Alison told her," Frank answered. "It would have been better if the announcement had come from me. Of course I intended telling her when I went on Monday. I could have —"

"Made an apology for me?"

"No, no," he said. "But it appears she wrote to me."

Susannah started slightly.

"I — I assumed she was hardly capable of writing," she suggested.

"She was capable of a good deal ten or twelve days ago."

"Was that when she wrote?" Susannah demanded.

"Yes," he continued. "You remember, my Aunt Alison was in London and I told her what I hoped — told her I hoped you would marry me. She passed the news on, and directly she went away my grandmother asked for writing materials. The nurse propped her up in bed and the letter was written. If I had received it the mischief would have been nipped in the bud."

"You — you did n't receive it then?" cried Susannah, starting suddenly to her feet. Her face was deathly pale and she stood staring at Frank in consternation.

"That 's the strange part of the affair," he continued. "My grandmother had barely strength to sign her name. She folded the letter and lay back in bed while the nurse addressed the envelope. The woman posted it herself late the same evening."

"That was last — last Tuesday week?" Susannah murmured.

"The evening of the day I asked you to be my wife," he said. "It ought, by a strange kind of fatality, to have been delivered by the same post as yours."

"Then it was n't?" she asked, scarcely appreciating what she said. "Did it miscarry?"

"It looks like it. I have been to the post-office. I've cross-examined the people of the house."

"You took the letters from the postman yourself that morning?" she said.

"I had eyes only for one of them," he answered. "I don't believe my grandmother's was delivered. But the result is the same anyhow."

"What is the result?" asked Susannah.

"It's a little difficult to tell you, dear. Remember she is very old, very bigoted. She conceived the most unreasonable antipathy to my marriage. It appears she wrote to put her veto on it. Of course, she did not know I had actually spoken to you; only that I intended to speak. She wrote — well, forbidding me to ask you to be my wife under all sorts of pains and penalties. And she demanded that I should come to her at once with the assurance. In fact she made an appointment for three o'clock the same day — the Wednesday afternoon."

"I see," said Susannah.

"Unfortunately," he went on, "I did n't depart from my ordinary custom. I did n't go near her till last Monday."

"Then you did n't see her?"

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"No, she had issued orders that I was not to be admitted. She had expected me the previous Wednesday — of course in vain. Instead of seeing me, she heard I was at Mrs. Blenkinsopp's with you on Thursday. Naturally, she concluded I had deliberately set her at defiance. I not only failed to keep the appointment and to give her an assurance that I would not ask you to be my wife, but I — well you know what I did."

"But you saw her this afternoon," said Susannah.

"Yes. I called at the house, and after a good deal of delay the nurse took me upstairs. If my grandmother had n't been half beside herself," Frank added, "I don't believe I should have been admitted at all. As it was, I had a bad quarter of an hour. She was in a terrible state of mind, insisted that I was the most ungrateful beggar under the sun, declared I had treated her with contempt, and wound up by telling me she had made a new will which did n't contain my name!"

Frank leaned back in his chair, puffing hard at his pipe, while Susannah stood with a hand on his shoulder.

"Suppose you had received the letter!" she cried suddenly.

"Of course I should have kept the appointment," he answered. "In her normal mood, I possess a

good deal of influence. I should have satisfied her that you were conferring the highest honour upon me."

"But if she had still proved antagonistic?" Susannah suggested.

"She would n't have done," Frank insisted. "I could have overcome her objections. They were mere prejudices."

"Surely," said Susannah, "when you explained that you had n't received the letter — "

"She flatly refused to believe me. It was the first time I ever had the lie direct," he exclaimed, "and it was n't pleasant. You must remember she was very excited. I honestly think she did n't appreciate what she said. From her point of view she had received a great affront. She had a right to different treatment. She believes that I traded on her illness, as it were."

"You will see her again in a more tranquil mood?" asked Susannah.

He clutched his beard and shook his head forcibly.

"She won't receive me. Besides, it 's probably too late. She is sinking fast and this excitement must hasten the end. She refused to believe her letter had miscarried."

"It was rather despotic to treat you in that way, without a chance to explain," said Susannah.

"She *is* despotic," he admitted. "She has been used to lord it over everybody for a quarter of a century. You see," Frank added, "I could only offer my assertion. I could n't prove a negative. It is impossible to convince her I did n't receive the thing, since she doubts my word. Of course it will make all the difference in the world."

"I suppose it will," she murmured.

"To you, also."

"Ye-es," she said.

"I should never have — if I had not counted — if I had not had something worth offering. As it is, I have told you as soon as I knew. For the rest, I must make the best of it and — "

"Yes?" she asked, as he paused.

"Congratulate Everard."

Quickly withdrawing her hand from his shoulder, Susannah stared down into Frank's face in utter astonishment.

"Everard!" she exclaimed.

"I imagine everything will go to him," he explained. "There are only the two of us. There are one or two life-charges on the estate, but it was always understood it should never be divided."

"You are not sure it will go to Everard?" she asked.

"I don't actually know it as a fact," Frank said, "but I feel morally certain."

Susannah looked at the flowers at her breast.

"It must make it seem the harder," she faltered.

"I don't know about that," he returned. "To pretend I don't value the money would be absurd. I stand to lose not only the estate, which I always regarded as my own, but also the income she has allowed me ever since I came of age. There won't be much left," he said ruefully. "But I chiefly regret what I 've lost — "

"As the price of me?" she cried. "Did you really think I was to be bought?"

"You are beyond price," he returned, looking at her hungrily. "But, unfortunately, one has to be practical."

"You must n't expect it of me!" she exclaimed. "I am the least practical person in the world!"

"Still — "

"My dear man, I can't argue. I believe Mrs. Rothesay will relent."

"Nothing is less likely. She may die at any moment. Besides, if she signed a will in her present condition it is doubtful whether it would stand."

"Well," said Susannah, "I can't help it. I really will not have my arrangements disturbed by

the vagaries of any old lady, even though she is your grandmother."

"You see," Frank explained, "the bulk of my present income will cease at her death. I shall be —"

"I decline to anticipate anybody's death," said Susannah, cheerfully. "Of course, it may be necessary to postpone the wedding," she added a moment later.

"Do you realise what you are doing?" he demanded.

"Perfectly."

"Because," he said, "it is n't in me to resist. If you will come to me, I shall take you and risk the consequences."

By way of answer she kneeled down again, resting her head on his shoulder.

"I believe," she whispered, "you are only just beginning to appreciate me."

"You have afforded me a kind of revelation."

"Rather a poor compliment, is n't it?" she asked.

"It was my blindness," he insisted. "I was an infernal fool. I have never understood you till to-night."

"And you think you understand me now?"

"I think so," he said contentedly.

CHAPTER VIII

On the following Tuesday afternoon, at four o'clock, Lord Fereday drove to Mrs. Wingood-Smyth's door in South Audley Street in a smart phaeton drawn by a pair of showy horses.

Everything about Lord Fereday, from the crown of his hat to his patent leather shoes with their white spats, was incapable of improvement, and his face wore an expression of quite unwonted determination.

At the moment of his arrival Elsa happened to be alone in the drawing-room, and Mrs. Wingood-Smyth, hearing his name as she descended the stairs, waited until he had entered, then passed on to the ground floor.

Elsa rose, offering her hand, and Lord Fereday sat down on the edge of a chair holding his hat on his knees.

"I have n't seen you since the cricket match," she said, after a short silence.

"We just managed to pull it off," he answered.

"Did you gain distinction?" she inquired.

"You see," she explained, "I was just getting set when the johnny gave me out leg before. Awfully hard lines! I 'd made twenty-three — four boundaries — and felt like getting a century. But that 's just my luck."

"Are you very unlucky?" she asked.

"Miss Treherne," he said, leaning forward, "did you ever feel like a horse that 's off his feed?"

"I am not sure I quite — "

"You feel you don't care for anything," he explained.

"Then I don't think I did," she said, "and you seemed to care a good deal about the cricket match a week ago."

"Upon my word," he exclaimed abruptly, "I wish I had never seen the woman!"

"Which woman?"

"You don't really believe that I — "

"If you are talking about Mrs. Murchison," said Elsa, "I told you once before that my opinion was not of the slightest consequence."

"But it is, don't you see. I know I made an awful idiot of myself."

"Don't you think discretion is the better part of valour?" Elsa suggested, wondering what had become of Mrs. Wingood-Smyth.

"If it comes to that," Fereday assured her,

"I 'd rather not say a word about it. There 's nothing I should like so much as to forget it ever happened."

"Why don't you?"

"I 'm afraid you won't," he said. "Now, I daresay you think it rather odd that a man should ask one woman to be his wife when he would give all the world to have another."

"I do," answered Elsa, with a laugh. But Fereday looked extremely grave.

"That 's what I did anyhow," he said. "I can't understand it."

"If you can't, you must hardly expect any one else to," she retorted. "So Everard Rothesay did n't make a mistake after all, Lord Fereday?"

"You see," he explained eagerly, "I had got the invitation to play for the M. C. C. That was on the Tuesday, you know. I got talking about it at the club and we had some drinks — "

"I see," said Elsa, a little contemptuously.

"You must n't think I 'm that sort of man," he cried, flushing like a girl. "Because I 'm not. Only, you see, I was most awfully pleased, and then I went on to Mrs. Murchison's. There was nobody else there and we got talking about golf and that sort of thing — I assure you I had n't the remotest intention, only my head felt odd,

don't you know, and she looked awfully fetching, she did really!"

"I don't doubt it for a moment," said Elsa.

"It slipped out before I knew where I was," he continued, with an uncomfortable sense that he was not improving his position very much, "I suppose I lost my head."

"Do you often —"

"I had n't thought of such a thing five minutes before," he said. "Of course, I don't want to say a word. Rothesay is a decent sort of chap, and I suppose he knows what he 's doing."

"Though you did not!"

"If I had," he admitted, "she 's the last woman in the world — but when I got outside, I felt — I can't tell you how I felt."

"You ought to have felt very pleased," Elsa suggested.

"I did n't," he returned. "I was the most miserable fellow under the sun. I could n't eat, I could n't bring myself to turn up at Lady Carstairs'; I did n't sleep a wink for wondering how to get out of it. I had promised to go at four o'clock, but I could n't wait till the afternoon. I thought I 'd just go to see how the land lay, never dreaming what sort of luck was in store for me, till I saw her in Rothesay's —"

"I think," said Elsa, "we may skip the details."

"Well," Fereday continued, "it was the best sight I ever saw, and when he asked me to congratulate him — I just did, as much as I knew."

"The grapes were sour," she cried.

"That 's what I want you to understand."

"What is?" she asked.

"That I never really cared — "

"For the woman you asked to be your wife?"

"I know it sounds rather strange," he said, "but it is absolutely true, and I do want to convince you."

"When are you going to begin your cruise?" she asked abruptly.

"I don't know," he answered with an air of disgust. "I feel downright wild with myself. I have n't the pluck to do anything. I 've been asked to play for the 'Originals' — they 're going to make a sort of tour — "

At this point Elsa heard the front-door bell ring, and with a sigh of relief looked for the arrival of another visitor. But the butler had gone to Mrs. Wingood-Smyth in the dining-room.

"Mr. Everard Rothesay," he said.

"I told you I was not at home to Mr. Rothesay, Walters."

"I beg pardon, m'm. Mr. Rothesay said he wanted to see you most urgent."

"Bring him in here," said Mrs. Wingood-Smyth after a moment's hesitation.

Though Everard was dressed in mourning, his face glowed with irrepressible happiness. His frigid reception seemed entirely without effect.

"I know I am committing a trespass," he said, as Mrs. Wingood-Smyth remained standing, "but my grandmother died early on Sunday morning. I have just come from her solicitor. He wrote to me — "

"Then," she asked quickly, "are you interested in the will after all?"

"She has left me everything," Everard replied.

"But I thought your cousin — "

"Yes, we all thought that. Frank is left out in the cold."

"In the circumstances," said Mrs. Wingood-Smyth, "that must be extremely inconvenient for him."

"I am afraid it must be. I have n't seen him yet," Everard answered. "To tell you the truth, I can't think of anybody but myself and — "

"Are you sure this is not another of your mistakes?" she asked.

"Perfectly sure. Or why should Warburton have sent for me? The will was only signed a week ago."

"Had your cousin offended Mrs. Rothesay in any way?"

"It is not very difficult to make a guess," Everard returned. "But I have n't given Frank a thought yet. I did n't expect a shilling. It completely took my breath away. I hardly know whether I am standing on my head or my heels."

As Everard spoke, he heard the hall door opened and shut. Glancing at the window, he saw Lord Fereday clamber to the box seat of his phaeton and drive away from the house.

"You know what my first thought would be," Everard added.

"I think you have taken care the whole world shall know," said Mrs. Wingood-Smyth more tolerantly. "You would like to inform Elsa of your good fortune."

He looked straight into Mrs. Wingood-Smyth's face and with suppressed excitement answered:

"I want to ask her to be my wife!"

"Surely you are acting a little precipitately," she insisted.

"I seem to have been waiting all my life," he said.

She regarded him with kindly gravity.

"You saw Lord Fereday drive away just now," she remarked. "He had been with Elsa some

time. Of course, I cannot say what passed between them."

Everard strode towards the door and opening it stood waiting for Mrs. Wingood-Smyth to leave the room.

"It is always unwise to count your chicks before they are hatched, Mr. Rothesay," she said as she passed out to the hall.

He followed her upstairs with his heart in his mouth, and on reaching the drawing-room door, Mrs. Wingood-Smyth stopped.

"You will find Elsa there," she said. "I shall join you presently."

Elsa was sitting with an open book in her hands, and on seeing Everard, the very last person she expected, rose with a startled expression. Stopping just within the room, he scrutinised her face, till her eyes fell beneath his gaze.

"You are in mourning," she faltered as he drew nearer.

"My grandmother is dead. You remember our last talk," Everard added, "the day I left Jermyn Street."

"Oh, yes."

"You tried to persuade me she would not leave me quite out in the cold."

"You were sceptical," she said. "You would

not be convinced. Was I — was I right after all?" Elsa asked nervously.

"She has left me everything."

"Then I — I suppose I ought to congratulate you!"

Everard took her hands.

"Elsa," he said, "Elsa, darling; Elsa —"

She stood looking into his eager face, half laughing, half crying.

"There 's nothing to hinder me from asking for you now, dear; nothing to prevent your coming."

A sob broke from her as he drew her head to his breast.

CHAPTER IX

"ARE you happy, Elsa?" asked Everard, not for the first time, a quarter of an hour later.

"Absolutely, perfectly," she answered. Of her own accord she placed a hand in his as they sat side by side on the sofa. "Happier than I ever dared to hope. And yet, I think, I was always more hopeful than you."

"I was utterly hopeless," he said. "I never dreamed of anything of the kind. It seems inconceivable that a day can have brought forth so much!"

"Yet," she murmured, "I always tried to believe it might come. Not that you would have everything, but something — enough to — "

"Elsa," he said, "when did you — when was the first — when did you begin to — "

"To hope?" she asked with a smile.

"To love me, dear?"

"Oh, I am ashamed to tell you."

"Because," he continued, "I could never make

quite sure. You used to fence so cleverly. You never admitted by word or deed."

"How could I, Everard?"

"Was it at Oakchester?" he asked.

"Long before my father's death. I was quite a child, but — "

"Yes, Elsa?"

"You were the first man who — "

"There were always plenty of fellows about your place," he said.

"But they were different," she insisted. "To them I was a *quantitée negligable*. You were — well you treated me, not exactly like a woman, but as if I were a sane being and then — "

"Yes, dear, and then — "

"Oh, what foolishness we are talking, Everard!" she exclaimed.

"Don't you think it 's rather jolly to talk foolishness?" he asked. "And then, Elsa?"

"I used to admire you so much," she said, covered with blushes, yet delighting in the confession so lately legalised. "I recollect the day you came first. I remember what you wore. I thought I had never seen anybody sit a horse so well — and I — I think I almost loved you then."

"Because I knew how to ride?" he cried, with a satisfied laugh.

"I don't know why I loved you, Everard."

"A child in short frocks! with her hair down her back!" he exclaimed, touching the early flaxen tresses at the nape of her neck.

"I was fourteen," she expostulated, "and my frocks were not very short. I remember feeling glad it was at the meet I saw you."

"Why, darling?"

"Oh, you will laugh at me," she said. "But I thought I looked older in my habit. Father always insisted that I should coil my hair up when I hunted. Then I wondered whether you would be disappointed next time to find I was a child."

"As though any one could be disappointed!" he returned. "Still, it was a kind of disillusioning, for I fancied you were seventeen. But the mischief had been done."

"Has it ever been undone?" asked Elsa.

"I don't think it has."

"You are not quite sure," she persisted.

"You see, dear, I was older than you," he explained. "I came back to London. I suppose I am about the same as other men."

"No," she said, "you are not at all the same."

Then the door opened and Mrs. Wingood-Smyth came in, darting a keen glance at Elsa.

"Well, good people!" she cried, as they rose with a guilty air from the sofa.

"Elsa has promised to be my wife," said Everard.

"Rash young woman!" was the answer, as Mrs. Wingood-Smyth leaned forward to kiss the girl's forehead. "Will you come back to dinner?" she asked, turning to Everard presently. "We have to put in an appearance at Mrs. Atherly's afterwards."

"Need we?" said Elsa.

"I am sure I have no wish to go," said her aunt. "It is no pleasure to me to sit up half the night. Then shall we spend the evening at home? We dine at eight, Mr. Rothesay."

He quitted the house in a condition of such exaltation as rarely possesses a man more than once in his lifetime. Hailing a hansom in Oxford Street, he ordered the driver to his lodging near Hampstead Heath. The face of the world seemed changed as he was driven along the familiar streets.

In the meantime, whilst Everard Rothesay had been explaining the revolution in his affairs to Mrs. Wingood-Smyth in South Audley Street, the same subject was discussed from a different point of view in Susannah's drawing-room.

"I could n't rest till I learned the actual truth,"

Frank said. "I took the bull by the horns and went to Warburton. She has n't left me even the proverbial shilling." A short silence ensued, then he added despondently, "I thought I ought to tell you as soon as the matter was placed beyond a doubt."

"Of course," said Susannah, "I naturally expect you to tell me everything."

"Well?" he asked.

"Well?" she echoed cheerfully.

"Are you still of the same mind?" he demanded.

"I never will desert Mr. Micawber!" she cried, with a laugh.

"It is magnificent," he said, "but it is not —"

"Certainly it is not war," she answered.

"You see," Frank returned, "we live in a work-a-day world, dear. I want you to realise that everything will be vastly different from what I hoped for you."

"I do," she said quietly.

"I should like to wring the necks of everybody who had a hand in the loss of my letter!" he cried.

Susannah shivered as she turned away.

"You have not seen Everard?" she asked.

"Not since he went back to Hampstead. But

he knows. Warburton wrote to him yesterday. You see, he would feel a kind of delicacy about coming to me, and I can't say I care to go to him."

"How he must marvel!" said Susannah. "Or perhaps he guesses. If I were you I should never want to see him again."

"Of course," Frank admitted, "I can't help feeling a little sore. But it is n't as though he had stirred a finger to oust me. He regarded the estate as so surely mine that he would have scorned to take a step to get it for himself."

"Although he had so much depending on it," Susannah suggested.

"That would n't enter into the question. A man is a gentleman or he is n't. There are things a gentleman does n't do."

"I understood," said Susannah, "that every one had his price."

"Every woman, they say. But," cried Frank enthusiastically, "heaven knows you have proved that is n't true. After all," he said, "need our wedding be very much delayed?"

"We will talk about it after the funeral," Susannah answered.

"But," Frank urged, "we know the worst. And if—"

She went on tipped-toes to place a hand over his lips.

"The discussion stands adjourned," she said. "And now you must go. I shall expect you to-morrow afternoon — not before half-past four. I shall be busy in the morning."

"You won't interrupt your preparations?" he suggested.

She shrugged her shoulders.

"Is that what you are going to be busy over to-morrow morning?" he persisted.

"What?"

"Well — the arrangements for our wedding, dearest?"

"Perhaps it is," she answered with a laugh, and before he had been gone five minutes Susannah sat down at her secretary.

Taking a telegraph form, she rapidly filled it in, then pressed the button of the electric bell.

"Take this to the post-office at once," she said to the servant.

But Susannah's face wore an expression of unaccustomed anxiety as soon as she was alone, and that evening passed very tediously. Not so to Everard, however, who reached South Audley Street again a little before eight o'clock. Entering the drawing-room, he found Elsa alone.

"Are you expecting any one else?" he asked, with a shade of disappointment in his voice.

"No, we shall be all by ourselves," she answered, "only," she added, glancing down at her light evening frock of the palest pink silk, "I felt it was a special occasion."

"There are moments," said Everard, "when I can hardly believe it yet. I found a dunning letter waiting for me at home, just a little urgent!"

"Did you contemplate flight?" she asked carelessly.

"It seemed impossible that I could look forward to paying the fellow next week. Even now I am here with you," he continued, "I feel almost apprehensive. Every now and then I wonder whether I shall wake."

"We should hardly both be dreaming the same thing," she said, with a laugh. "Don't you think it's rather a nice dream, Everard?"

"To imagine," he exclaimed, "that I may see you when I like and some day take you away altogether!"

"It is a little early to talk about that," she remonstrated, as Mrs. Wingood-Smyth entered.

Presently Everard offered his arm and led her downstairs to the dining-room. It was the merriest of meals, and when it ended, the hostess glanced significantly at Elsa.

"We will follow you to the drawing-room in a few minutes," she said, and as Everard rose to open the door, Elsa went away somewhat unwillingly.

"Of course," Mrs. Wingood-Smyth added, when he had returned to his chair, "I stand towards Elsa as a parent."

"You have been very good to her," Everard answered.

"It would be affectation to pretend I had not," she said. "Though you would hardly have admitted it yesterday. My arrangements for the autumn are made. I am going to stay with my daughter Edith for a month or longer and I am afraid you won't see much of Elsa while we are there."

"When are you going away?" Everard inquired.

"I might stay in London a month — five weeks at the outside."

"Do you object to our marriage taking place before you go?" he asked.

"Of course," she replied, "the question of settlements will arise. That is better left to your solicitor and mine. For the rest, you seem to have made up your minds."

"I think we have," he said.

"Only, Elsa may have something to say about the date."

"I fancy she will be open to persuasion."

"Well, you will find her in the drawing-room. Arrange things with her and I don't suppose I shall make any objection."

Waiting for no second bidding, Everard went upstairs.

"Have you discussed your secrets?" asked Elsa, not without a trace of vexation, as he entered.

"You were the secret," he said.

"Oh, yes, I knew that!"

"Mrs. Wingood-Smyth tells me you are going away in five weeks time."

"To my cousin's."

"A month," he said, "and we sha'n't meet."

"What nonsense!" Elsa exclaimed. "Edith will invite you directly I tell her."

"I have a better remedy than that," Everard urged. "We can go away together — you and I alone."

"My aunt has been urging you," she cried quickly.

"Do you imagine I needed the spur?"

"Still, it seems rather horrid."

"Not at all, quite the reverse. We shall be married a few weeks earlier than I dared to anticipate."

"But there is no hurry at all," she expostulated.

"Only that I am impatient and circumstances seem to fit my mood," he answered. "You are not reluctant to come to me, Elsa?"

"It doesn't seem that I have much choice," she said. "Oh, I believe my aunt would do anything to get rid of me before the beginning of the hunting season! For the last three months that has been her chief desire in life."

"And for three years my chief desire has been to win you, dear; but of course if you really object—"

"I think I would sooner wait," she returned. "But—but I suppose I shall have to put up with it."

"Then you will be my wife before Mrs. Wingood-Smyth leaves London, Elsa?"

"I suppose so. It all seems very sudden. Only yesterday—"

"Yesterday seems a thousand years ago," he exclaimed. "Darling, where shall we go to?"

"Go to?"

"For our honeymoon?"

"The idea of discussing it the very day—was ever such a thing done before?" she asked.

"You see, we are creatures of circumstance. Tell me where you would like to go?" he urged.

"Everywhere," she answered, brightening again.

"There 's the whole world before us, Elsa. You would like to go abroad? Paris and the South of France; we can work back by way of Strasbourg and Geneva, so to Cologne and Brussels."

"It sounds delightful!" she cried.

"Can you picture it! You and I together! We need not hurry back, but when we return we must see about our house."

"Yes," she said dreamily, and her thoughts flew even ahead of Everard's.

"Where should you like to live?" he asked.

"I have never thought about it; but," she added, "there is one thing I should love."

"You have only to tell me."

"You speak as if you had a wishing-cap," she returned.

"I have nothing left to wish for, Elsa. Besides, we have a Fortunatus' purse."

"I should like to go to dear old Oakchester," she explained. "How good it would be! If we — if we could get a place there for the winter."

"At all events, I 'll try," he answered. "I will write to the local agent at once. I suppose I may come to see you in the morning?"

"Of course."

"And will you go out with me?"

"Why not?" she asked.

"What time may I call for you?"

"I can be ready by eleven if you like," she said.

"I 'm afraid that 's too early," he answered. "I got a wire from Susannah just as I was leaving Hampstead."

"Does Mrs. Murchison often send you telegrams?"

"It is a first experience," Everard returned. "By-the-bye, you will be a kind of cousins."

"Is it anything very important?" asked Elsa, disregarding his last remark.

"She says so. But all her geese are swans. I am to be with her at eleven, — if I may come here afterwards."

"When she has quite finished with you," said Elsa. "Have you no idea what she wants?"

"Not the slightest. You know what an erratic little woman it is."

"All I know about Mrs. Murchison," Elsa insisted, "is that she appears to be a great friend of yours."

"Is n't that just as it ought to be, since she is going to marry Frank?"

"But will she — now?" asked Elsa. "Because she can't really care for him."

"Well," said Everard, "it 's dangerous to assert

anything about so inconstant a factor. But I feel pretty sure of her constancy to Frank."

"Yet she accepted Lord Fereday the day before —"

"Oh," Everard remonstrated, "you are thinking of my mistake."

"Yes, I know how you made it!"

"Did Fereday tell you?" he asked quickly.

"At all events," said Elsa, "I know. So that it is a little difficult to believe that Mrs. Murchison —"

"Honestly I believe she does," he answered. "You must n't judge her by yourself. If you knew Susannah as well as I do, you would n't be astonished at anything. Then," Everard added, "I shall come at twelve to-morrow and you will let me take you to the jeweller's."

"It will be very nice," she said brightly.

"We have an immensely good time before us, Elsa."

"I hope so. I think we have."

"You make no reservations?"

"None," she answered. "Not one; not the shadow of one."

CHAPTER X

"I HAD your telegram yesterday," said Everard Rothesay, as he took Susannah's proffered hand at eleven o'clock on Wednesday morning.

"Were you very much astonished?" she asked.

"I don't think I was."

"You are very punctual," she said.

"I happen to have an appointment at noon," he answered gleefully.

"Do sit down," she cried. "You don't ask why I sent for you!"

"You wanted to talk about Frank?" Everard suggested.

"He has seen Mr. Warburton."

"Then he knows —"

"That Mrs. Rothesay wished to prevent him from marrying me," she said.

"I hope she has not succeeded."

"Certainly not," was the answer. "He offered to release me — I preferred bondage. But does n't her caprice astonish you — I don't mean her objection to me, but that she should cast Frank off —"

"Of course, I don't know what had passed between them," said Everard.

"Can you carry your memory back a fortnight?" Susannah asked.

"To tell you the truth," he answered, "I am more than a little hazy about time."

"At least you recollect destroying a certain letter — it was a fortnight ago to-day."

"Yes," said Everard, looking rather astonished, "I am not likely to forget that. Though the only thing certain about it is its uncertainty."

"I am afraid not," Susannah retorted. "It was from Mrs. Rothesay to Frank."

"How do you know?" he demanded eagerly.

"She told Frank last Saturday."

"But I know my grandmother's writing as well as I know my own."

"The envelope was addressed by her nurse," said Susannah. "The letter contained an expostulation about me! Mrs. Rothesay had heard from an aunt of yours — "

"Aunt Alison!"

"That Frank intended to ask me to be his wife. She demanded that he should do nothing of the kind, and asked him to call on the Wednesday afternoon. Of course, you had destroyed the letter. He was entirely unconscious it had ever

existed. When he went the following Monday she would n't see him. He saw her the day before her death, and then she told him —"

"What, in heaven's name!" cried Everard, standing upright a few feet from Susannah's chair.

"The gist of it was," she explained, "that he had treated her wishes with contempt; that she had signed a new will, — solely because he took no notice of the letter he had never seen, which you intercepted and tore into fragments."

"I wish," Everard exclaimed vehemently, "I had cut off my right hand before I touched it!"

"It really would have made very little difference," she said gently. "Your position would have been actually much the same. Frank would have come if you had not interfered, — so would Lord Fereday."

"But would Frank —"

"Have given me up?" she interrupted. "Perhaps not. He would have kept Mrs. Rothesay's appointment. What affronted her was his absence — his silence."

"He saw her on Saturday," urged Everard. "Surely he explained that he had not received her letter!"

"It was too late. She was in a half-delirious condition. She refused to believe his explanation.

But if he had gone at once, he could have overcome her objection. You don't grasp the true inwardness of the situation."

"I am beginning to grasp it," he said dejectedly.

"Mrs. Rothesay acted as she did," Susannah insisted, "solely because of what she regarded as Frank's silent contempt. Because he did not take any notice of the letter which you destroyed."

Everard looked at his watch. It wanted twenty-five minutes to twelve. There was only just time to reach South Audley Street by noon. He pictured Elsa expecting him! After a short silence Everard asked:

"Does Frank know the facts?"

"I was placed in a difficult position," Susannah answered.

"Where did the difficulty come in?"

"I could not tell him the truth —"

"Although he had so much at stake?" he suggested.

"But," she cried, rising impulsively, "I have a great deal at stake, too."

"Naturally — his interest is yours," said Everard.

"More than his *interest*," she returned. "I did not say a word. How could I? Your name came up —"

"I suppose he was a little sore?"

"Immensely disappointed, naturally," she admitted. "But he says you regarded the estate as so surely his —"

"I did. That is quite true."

"That you would not," she said significantly, "move a finger to secure it for yourself. It's true," she added, "I hesitated after Frank had told me on Saturday. I thought of doing an heroic thing! I had the idea of writing a full confession, so that he might take you to see Mrs. Rothesay. But I am not very clever at sacrificing myself, and Mrs. Rothesay died the next morning."

"But," cried Everard, "suppose he had received her letter and stood fast, — that she had not yielded."

"I should have released him," said Susannah, "rather than let him pay such a price."

"Yet you let him run the risk now, sooner than tell him the truth!" cried Everard, sceptically.

"The circumstances are quite different," she insisted. "In the one case I should have parted with Frank, in the other with his respect. Besides," she added, "he runs no risk, your being the man you are."

"Do you realise the difference it makes to me?" he demanded almost roughly. "Elsa is waiting for me. She has promised to be my wife."

"I am sorry," she said.

He sat down and bowing his head to his hands remained in this attitude for several minutes. Presently Susannah touched his arm lightly.

"When shall you see Frank?" she asked.

"I have not decided," he answered, showing a gray face. "I can't get my thoughts in order yet."

"I trust you implicitly," she said.

Everard rose and began to pace the room; then stopped in front of Susannah.

"I have an uncomfortable feeling that you are playing me," he remarked. "My loss is your gain!"

"You can't lose what was never yours," she retorted. "And what have I done? I was compelled to enlighten you. Just as you are compelled to restore the estate to Frank."

"You knew that," he said, "when you refused to let him release you."

She lowered her eyes, trifling with the ribands on her dress.

"You hoodwinked him to the top of your bent," Everard added.

"Not at all. I merely convinced him of a truth," she returned. "Knowing why Mrs. Rothesay altered her will you cannot — actually you cannot — let yourself profit by it, any more than you can betray me!"

"It will be a little difficult to explain matters without," he said.

"I trust you perfectly," cried Susannah. "Frank is coming here at half-past four. I shall not say that I have seen you."

He took his hat from the table and stared down at her face blankly.

"Very well," he said.

"And," she continued, "you quite understand that my name need not even be mentioned."

"Of course," he answered curtly and walked to the door.

As he left the room, a great change passed over Susannah's face. Her hands trembled as she pushed back her hair. Before Everard was half way to Mrs. Wingood-Smyth's house, she looked at the clock, longing for the hour of Frank's arrival.

"You are late," cried Elsa, as Everard entered the drawing-room.

"I am sorry, Elsa. I was detained."

"Could n't you tear yourself away from Mrs.

Murchison?" she asked, as he took her in his arms.

"Very willingly," he said ruefully, as she disengaged herself.

"Shall we start?" she asked.

"I — I am afraid I can't take you this morning, darling — "

"It is not of the slightest consequence," she said. "Is anything wrong, Everard?" she added, looking into his gray face.

He led her to the sofa and sat down by her side.

"I think the quickest way will be to begin at the beginning," he said, and first pledging her to secrecy, began to describe his visit to Mrs. Murchison on the evening of Lady Carstairs' dance. As he related what had passed between himself and Susannah an hour ago, Elsa grew apprehensive.

"But," she said when he ended, "it is impossible to be sure that this was actually Mrs. Rothesay's reason."

"I am afraid there 's no doubt, dear."

"Do you think your cousin would have sacrificed Mrs. Murchison at his grandmother's order?" Elsa asked.

"I am sure he would n't, but he would have gone to expostulate. He possessed a good deal of

influence. Besides," Everard added, "Susannah vows she would have given him up to save his fortune."

"But would she?" Elsa persisted.

"I begin to think," said Everard, "that she would, — whatever her motive. Try to put yourself in her place," he continued, looking eagerly into her gray eyes. "I asked you yesterday to be my wife. Suppose that to-day I stood where I did a week ago." Everard paused a moment, taking her hands and looking as though his life depended on her answer. "How should you act?" he asked.

Elsa sat perfectly motionless, staring down at her imprisoned hands.

"I can't conceive anything so — so utterly impossible," she cried.

"You see, Elsa, I cannot very well keep money which would never have been mine if I had n't destroyed Frank's letter."

"Surely," she said, regarding him with consternation, "you don't intend to give up the whole estate!"

"I am bound," Everard insisted, "to put things back just as they were before I touched the letter."

"But then you will have nothing!" Elsa exclaimed.

"Oh, it won't be quite so bad as that, dear. I shall have as much as I had a week ago plus the knowledge that you love me."

"Things seemed so hopeless a week ago!" she murmured.

"Yes," he urged, "you had not promised to be my wife then."

"You did not dream of asking me, Everard!"

"Dearest, we can't undo the fact. I did ask you and you consented, and things can never be put back as they were."

The door opened and Mrs. Wingood-Smyth came into the room, wearing her bonnet and looking fresher and more florid than usual after a walk.

"I didn't think you would be home first," she exclaimed cheerfully. "Well, Elsa, will you show me your ring?" she asked.

Elsa rose hastily and walking to the window stood gazing mistily down at the road.

CHAPTER XI

"You don't mean to tell me you two good people have been quarrelling already!" said Mrs. Wingood-Smyth, smiling at Everard.

"No," he answered, "we have n't been quarrelling."

With one or two desirable omissions, in as few words as possible, Everard repeated what he had just told to Elsa; and as the story went on, a gradual and significant transformation occurred in the listener's face.

"Then," she demanded, "what do you propose to do in the matter?"

"I have n't much choice," said Everard. "I shall make a clean breast of it and leave the rest to the solicitor."

"And what do you propose that Elsa shall do?"

Everard looked expressively into Mrs. Wingood-Smyth's face. "You actually intend to renounce your fortune!" she cried quickly.

"It is hardly mine," he insisted.

"Possession," she said, "is nine points of the law."

"Occasionally it is followed by a conviction," he returned.

"Of course," she answered, "it is for you to decide. I am the last person in the world to attempt to persuade you. But it is extremely unpleasant for us. I am not blaming you, only when you spoke to me yesterday, I understood you were Mrs. Rothesay's heir. Now that the conditions are altered, naturally I must withdraw my consent."

"Is n't it a day after the fair?" he asked, stepping nearer to Elsa, who still stood at the window with her back to the room.

"You can't run with the hare and hunt with the hounds," said Mrs. Wingood-Smyth. "You have a perfect right to throw away your fortune, but you must distinctly understand —"

"But, Auntie —"

As Elsa turned her back to the window, Mrs. Wingood-Smyth paused with an air of laboured patience.

"Yes, Elsa?" she said, while Everard watched the girl eagerly.

"Mr. Rothesay can never — Oh, he can never accept such a sacrifice!" Elsa exclaimed.

"Since one member of the family can act so strangely, it is impossible to say what another may do. I have really no desire to argue the point, but Mr. Rothesay," she glanced at Everard, "seems to leave you out of his reckoning entirely. He is determined to be generous at your expense."

"I 'm not sure I even wish to be just," said Everard, "as far as that goes. But there are things a man can't do."

"He certainly cannot eat his pie and have it," she retorted. "I confess I fail to understand how you can contemplate such madness!"

"How can I avoid it?"

"Can anything be easier —"

"Than to accept a fortune which never could have been mine if —"

"As I said before," Mrs. Wingood-Smyth exclaimed, "you are showing Elsa not the slightest consideration."

Elsa looked into his agitated face with something like expectancy. Everard stood silent a few moments, then Mrs. Wingood-Smyth asked:

"When are you going to your cousin?"

"I don't see that anything 's to be gained by delay," he answered.

"Certainly not, if you have made up your mind."

He took his hat from the table.

"You see," he explained, "it was n't exactly a question of making up my mind. Once the word was given, I saw I must act. There was never an alternative."

"Well," she said, with a sigh, "you are the most perverse man I ever had to deal with, and that is saying a great deal."

As he walked to the door, Elsa darted forward, and disregarding Mrs. Wingood-Smyth's glance, passed out of the room first. Overtaking her on the staircase, Everard placed a hand through her arm, and they descended together. On reaching the hall, she opened the dining-room door, and as it closed drew near to him, winding her arms about his neck. A great change seemed to have occurred in her since they quitted Mrs. Wingood-Smyth's presence. All reserve was for the moment thrown aside, and she clung to him with a passionate fervour of which he had thought her scarcely capable.

"Everard," she whispered, "you told me yesterday you loved me."

"Darling, it was n't necessary. You have known I loved you for years."

"Better than all the world besides!"

"It was God's truth, Elsa," he said, pressing her yielding body.

"Yet," she cried bitterly, "you are — you are throwing me away!"

"No," he answered, "I am not throwing you away. What is more, no one can compel you —"

"Don't go to Jermyn Street," she pleaded. "It is the first thing I have ever asked you to do for me. For my sake, don't go!"

"I suppose women see things differently," he said.

Speaking with an excitement that completely carried her sway, she stepped backwards, throwing out her hands with a gesture of despair.

"The last few months," she cried, "I have lived in dread. Sometimes I tried to hope, but the fear always haunted me. Yesterday I think I showed you my soul. When my aunt brought me to London she let me understand — I have been taken here and there — I have accepted the position. What else could I do?"

"Yes, darling, but —"

"I know what will happen," she said impetuously. "I have no choice —"

"You are able to choose," he answered. "And no one on earth can prevent you. No one can compel you to act against your will, Elsa."

"Ah, there are different kinds of compulsion,"

she returned. "You are throwing me away. And I love you, Everard."

"Is n't that all we want?" he urged.

"I did not dream there was such happiness in the world," she said, "and you are destroying it utterly."

He shook his head slowly.

"It may last for ever, Elsa."

"You heard what my aunt said!"

"Ah, but you have given yourself to me, dear, and there 's a world for us if we care to live in it. Nobody can hinder us from fashioning our lives."

"Then," Elsa cried, with a note of reproach in her voice, "you won't do what I ask you?"

"I can't, dear. It is n't a question whether I will or will not. I can no more refrain from going to Frank than I could pick a man's pocket in the street."

She stood silent a few moments, then exclaimed suddenly:

"He can never accept such a sacrifice."

"It is n't exactly a sacrifice from his point of view, Elsa. Frank will regard it as belated justice, and so it is, — neither more nor less. I am giving up nothing — "

"Only me," she murmured.

"Whatever happens, we may still be happy, dear, — if happiness consists in being together. Wait till you see me again. I will come back after I have seen Frank, and then I shall talk to your aunt."

She stood in the same position after he had gone, until, hearing the luncheon gong, she hurriedly went upstairs to her own room. Mrs. Wingood-Smyth sent her maid with a message, but Elsa declining to come downstairs, presently ascended herself to the girl's room.

"You must try to be brave," she said, sitting beside her on the bed and pushing back a tress of hair from Elsa's forehead.

"Oh, the suspense is unbearable!" cried Elsa, rising impulsively.

"Suspense! Nothing seems more inevitably certain."

"He is coming after he has seen Frank Rothesay," said Elsa.

Mrs. Wyngood-Smith looked annoyed. "What is the use?" she demanded.

"Mr. Rothesay can never —"

"Never what, Elsa?"

"Oh, he must — he must leave us something!"

"My dear child," said her aunt, not ungently, "it is worse than folly to expect anything of that kind."

"I do!"

"You surely don't imagine that Mr. Rothesay will give up any portion of what he will no doubt regard as entirely his own. Men don't do that kind of thing. Everard could n't accept alms from his cousin. Don't think of such an absurdity for an instant. Now, the best thing you can do is to lie down. Don't leave your room till I send for you."

Mrs. Wingood-Smyth went to the drawing-room and rang the bell. When the butler came, she said: "If Mr. Rothesay arrives while Lord Fereday is here, ask him into the dining-room. I am not at home to anybody else."

Lord Fereday drove up to the door at half-past three, and was at once taken to the drawing-room.

"It was most awfully good of you to give me an appointment so soon," he began. "I hope Miss Treherne is quite well."

"Not very well," she answered. "When I received your note this morning I wrote at once. I am always prompt, Lord Fereday."

"I saw Miss Treherne yesterday," he said, "but the fact is, we 're like two johnnies with the gloves on. As fast as one comes forward, the other dodges; there 's no getting to work, you know."

"Shall you think me very stupid," she asked, "if I admit I don't quite understand you?"

"You see, I 'm awfully fond of Miss Treherne," he said, with a good deal of warmth.

"We are all very fond of Elsa," answered Mrs. Wingood-Smyth.

"I 've often tried to tell her," he said despondently. "I don't know how it is, but as soon as I think I 'm there, away she goes on a different tack. I don't seem to get more forward. I had an idea of writing. There are things a man can say so much better in a letter."

"Oh, I should n't do that, Lord Fereday. Am I to understand," she inquired with a sigh, "that you wish to make a formal proposal for Elsa's hand?"

"Yes, that 's about it," he answered brightly.

But Mrs. Wingood-Smyth looked exceedingly chagrined. It was what she had been scheming for ever since she took Elsa in charge. Now, alas! for human propositions, she perceived the chance of victory at the moment of defeat.

"I always speak my mind," she said, "and I admit that nothing would please me more. You are no doubt aware that Elsa is absolutely penniless."

Lord Fereday made a deprecatory gesture.

"I wonder," she continued, "whether you are prepared to do something very difficult."

"I would do anything," he exclaimed. "You see," he added, "I fancied I was all right till that wretched report got about. I have explained it was all a mistake — "

Mrs. Wingood-Smyth seized her opportunity:

"Some mistakes are very difficult to understand," she said significantly. "Elsa is no ordinary girl. I was going to ask whether you would take my advice," she continued. "I should advise you to let the matter drop for a time."

"But you will be leaving London. You see I 've been asked to play for the 'Originals' and I want to know — "

"We are going to stay with my daughter," she explained. "You know Mrs. Charlesworth? I am sure she will be delighted if you will join her house-party."

"That 's most awfully good of you!" he exclaimed.

"Afterwards," she said, "we shall go to Melton, in all probability. I don't know whether you had any idea — "

"Yes, I had," Fereday promptly answered. "Upon my word," he added as he rose, "you have been tremendously kind to me."

"Not at all," said Mrs. Wingood-Smyth, offering her hand. "I am not absurd enough to pretend I should n't be pleased to see Elsa Lady Fereday."

"I know I should be," he answered.

CHAPTER XII

On leaving Elsa, Everard Rothesay stood for a few minutes outside Mrs. Wingood-Smyth's door, hesitating which way to turn.

Whilst his very dislike to the interview with Frank impelled him to get it over since it was inevitable; like a timid actor, he yet desired to con his part once more before going on to the stage.

Events had befallen so thickly as to leave little breathing space; besides, it was about two o'clock; Frank would probably lunch at his club, so that eventually Everard turned towards Oxford Street.

He would defer the interview for an hour and meanwhile fortify himself against it. Instead of going to his own club, preferring solitude for once to companionship, he entered the first restaurant he came to.

It was a busy hour of the day. Waiters were hurrying hither and thither with pyramids of plates. Sitting down at one of the small tables, Everard ordered some cutlets and Chianti, eating his meal

to the accompaniment of a peculiar sense of being somebody else. Assuredly he felt quite unlike the man who had gone so blithely to South Audley Street yesterday afternoon.

Presently, lighting a cigar, Everard leaned back against the crimson velvet-covered bench and began seriously to consider his rôle.

He perceived that it might prove a difficult one. He had to confess to an action of which he now felt somewhat ashamed,—to satisfy Frank, yet not on any account to incriminate Susannah.

For though he would infinitely have preferred to make a clean breast of everything from first to last, this, in the circumstances, appeared impossible. Everard could not entertain the idea of telling Frank that he had intercepted the letter at Susannah's instigation, thus leading up to an explanation concerning her relation to Lord Fereday. He perceived, in short, that there was scarcely any choice between the exposure of Susannah before the eyes of her fiancé and a subterfuge.

Before his cigar was finished, he left the restaurant, but when he rang the bell of the house in Jermyn Street, Everard was still without any definite plan of campaign.

He found the room full of smoke, and Frank rose slowly from an arm-chair, with a pipe between

his lips, as Everard entered. His manner appeared a little constrained; both men, in truth, felt embarrassed, shaking hands limply and in silence.

"I wanted to have a jaw if you can spare a few minutes," said Everard.

"All right," cried Frank, dropping into a chair again. "Have you got a pipe?"

"Thanks, I won't smoke."

"I suppose," said Frank, "I ought to congratulate you, but — well, you must n't expect much enthusiasm. I can say this: since the estate was n't to come to me, I 'd sooner you had it than any one else. Further than that, I 'm afraid I can't go. You were a bit surprised?" he asked.

"Yes, I was."

"The fact is," Frank began to explain, "the old lady wrote to me — "

"I know all about it," said Everard.

"Who told you?"

"Oh — er — I heard it from Warburton." Everard looked uncomfortable as he shifted his position.

"Of course; she used to tell him most things," said Frank. "I should like to know the fate of that confounded letter!"

"I am going to tell you."

"You!"

"It was I who —"

Frank gripped the warm bowl of his pipe and stared at Everard in utter astonishment.

"Do you mean to say you took my letter?" he exclaimed.

"Yes."

"What on earth did you do with it?"

"I destroyed it," said Everard. "I tore it into fragments."

"Knowing whose it was?" Frank demanded wrathfully.

"How could I know?"

"I suppose," said Frank, "there was a crest on the envelope."

"I did n't look," retorted Everard.

"You deliberately tore up a letter addressed to me! What earthly motive could you have?"

"I want you to let me off the explanation, old fellow."

"It seems to me," cried Frank, "I am entitled to a pretty lucid one. You must have had a motive. What was it?"

Everard rose and leaned against the mantelpiece, looking down calmly into Frank's angry face.

"When I left my room that morning," he said,

"I came straight to the hall. The letters lay there. I expected to find one amongst them — "

"For yourself?"

"Which I wanted to destroy without reading."

"At least," said Frank, "you could read the address on the envelope!"

"I noticed one letter — "

"But, good heavens, man, if you wanted to destroy the letter you must have known the handwriting."

"Oh, yes," Everard admitted. "In fact I had received a letter from the same person the previous evening. But I made a blunder. I mistook the writing."

"When did you discover that the letter was mine?"

"The same day," Everard answered, cautiously.

"How?"

"The writer enlightened me."

"Had n't any letter come for you, after all?" asked Frank.

"I learnt from her own lips that I had destroyed the wrong letter."

"Then it was a woman, — of course, or you could n't have mistaken the writing."

"Yes," Everard admitted, with obvious reluctance.

"But I thought — how about Elsa Treherne?" asked Frank, significantly.

"Oh, we can cut the details!" cried his cousin.

"I can understand," was the answer, "how you came to destroy the letter. It requires all the imagination I can muster; still, I can just conceive that you mistook the initial. What I can't make out is your silence after you discovered the blunder."

"Neither can I, now I come to think of it," said Everard. "I was wrong; I ought to have told you."

"You played me a scurvy trick," exclaimed Frank, gripping his beard as he glared up into Everard's face. "You made me appear the meanest cur who ever lived. You might have lost me my wife. Many women would have flung me aside, though Susannah did n't."

"I am doing all I can to make amends," said Everard.

"Anyhow, it has cost me — "

"It will not cost you a penny. Of course," Everard continued, "I can't keep the money now I know. I shall write to Warburton to-day. I am prepared to put everything back exactly as it would have been if I had not touched the letter."

Frank leaned back in his chair. His large hands trembled as they rested on its arms.

"I wish, all the same," he said presently, "you had spoken at the time."

"So do I," answered Everard, fervently. "Still there's no harm done — as far as you are concerned."

"That's all very well. But if a man takes my umbrella and lets me get soaked, knowing it's mine, he can hardly expect me to feel pleased with him even when he returns it."

"I know I have been wrong," said Everard. "I am doing all I know to make up for it." He took his hat and walked to the door. "I shall write to Warburton directly I get home," he added.

"I suppose," returned Frank, rising, "it's a bitter pill to swallow."

"It is — rather."

"After all, you stand where you did a week ago. You have n't had time to — "

"I had time to ask Elsa to be my wife," said Everard.

"What will she say now? " asked Frank.

"I am not sure. I hope she will go through with it. Of course, there is Mrs. Wingood-Smyth's influence to fight against. But still I hope she won't throw me over."

"Then how do you propose to live?"

"I suppose I can work. I've taken things rather easily up to now. I shall alter all that."

"My dear fellow," cried Frank, warmly, "if you take it that way, you'll do. I wish you luck."

Then Everard passed into the hall and let himself out of the house. Frank reloaded his pipe and began to pace the room, slowly at first, but presently with increasing excitement. Half an hour later, he put on his hat and took a hansom to Susannah's flat, breaking into her drawing-room before the servant had time to announce him, in a condition of quite unwonted excitement.

"I have found out who took my letter!" he exclaimed. "You will never guess!"

Susannah stood nervously before him, her face pale, her eyes large and bright.

"Oh," she said, "I am not clever at guessing. I am not clever at anything."

"It was Everard!"

"Everard!" she said, with as much astonishment as the occasion seemed to warrant.

"He was staying with me at the time, you remember," Frank explained. "As far as I can make out he had an entanglement with some woman. She was bothering him with letters and he meant to destroy the next unread. I suppose

the fellow was a trifle off his head and tore up mine by mistake. Some women do write very much alike. What I can't understand," said Frank, "is why he did n't tell me. He found out his blunder the next day. The fact is, Master Everard had been confiding in me about Elsa Treherne — "

"I see," said Susannah, breathing more freely.

"Well, for my part," he answered, "I am a little hazy about the details even now. Nothing can undo the fact that my grandmother died thinking me an ungrateful brute. However," Frank added, "he is going to make over the money. Of course, he could hardly do less."

"I suppose not," Susannah murmured.

"You see," Frank continued, "if a man takes my purse, even by accident, that does n't give him a claim to any portion of the contents."

"Only persons who take purses don't always return them," she suggested.

"Of course," said Frank, "Everard is a gentleman, though he ought to have told me as soon as he knew. Suppose it had been your letter! It might have been. The injury would have been irreparable!"

"Do you think it would?" Susannah asked quietly.

"At all events," he said, "it has taught me what you are." She smiled very faintly. "I was stripped of my possessions. You stuck to me, nevertheless. I only hope Elsa Treherne will do the same by Everard. The fellow asked her to be his wife yesterday; this morning he heard about the letter."

"Who — who told him?" asked Susannah.

"Warburton. He has gone to South Audley Street to learn his fate."

"Is that doubtful?"

"If one woman could do it, so may another," returned Frank. "Besides if once he goes to work in earnest, he will travel far."

"Can you imagine Everard going to work in earnest?" cried Susannah, with a laugh.

"With a wife —"

"I can't conceive it. Besides, is n't it putting the cart before the horse?"

"They are both young," said Frank. "They can wait."

"Mrs. Wingood-Smyth may not think so."

"But surely —"

"Besides, the girl herself must be taken into account."

"Then," said Frank, "do you suppose she will throw him over?"

"Naturally."

"I think if would be quite unnatural," he retorted. "Rather barefaced, too. She accepted him yesterday when he was rich. To throw him over to-day —"

"What a dear, simple man you are!" Susannah exclaimed. "One might be very fond of Everard, yet shrink from depending on his exertions. Love in cottages is out of date."

"Not so long as the world lasts," he said.

"They don't exist in our world. You will see, Elsa Treherne will be Lady Fereday within a year."

"Then I confess I don't understand women," Frank returned.

"Of course not."

"Bar one," he said.

"Are you sure you understand her?"

"Darling, you have taught me. I know the value of my prize."

"I wonder how long this will last!" she cried.

"As long as my life — I am not a man who changes," he said.

"But I," Susannah answered, "change every hour of the day!"

"Yet you 're always the same!"

"I wonder," she said, looking up into his beam-

ing face half laughing, "I wonder whether you will ever find me out."

"You see, thanks to Everard's laches, I have found you out."

"You have n't even learnt your ignorance," she retorted. "Is n't that the beginning of knowledge?"

"At all events," Frank said, with a satisfied smile, "our wedding need not be postponed now. Before the discovery takes place you will be my wife. I shall have taken you for better, for worse."

"I think it is just as well," said Susannah.

CHAPTER XIII

On leaving Frank's rooms, Everard Rothesay turned in the direction of South Audley Street. Feeling conscious that he had to endure a critical ordeal, his chief desire was to see Elsa alone before facing Mrs. Wingood-Smyth.

When the butler opened the door, Everard asked for Miss Treherne, and was taken upstairs; but on entering the drawing-room, he saw Mrs. Wingood-Smyth sitting very erect, her hands being occupied with some kind of fancy-work.

Looking remarkably alert, she greeted him with a smile which expressed nothing like encouragement. Elsa rose from the sofa, but sat down again without a word, her eyes fixed expectantly on his face.

"Well, did you see Mr. Rothesay?" asked Mrs. Wingood-Smyth, cheerfully.

"Yes."

"I presume he was a little surprised by what you had to tell him."

"He was a little," Everard answered.

Elsa leaned eagerly forward.

"Did he — oh," she cried, "he never allowed you to sacrifice everything!"

"There was n't any question of sacrifice," said Everard. "I simply offered to restore the *status quo*."

"And," Mrs. Wingood-Smyth exclaimed, "he naturally acquiesced. Of course," she added, "you realise all that this signifies?"

"I stand exactly where I did three days ago as regards —"

"And Elsa also," said Mrs. Wingood-Smyth, quickly.

Standing beside Elsa, Everard glanced across the room at her aunt, a silent petition for her withdrawal.

"You are both very young," she continued, regarding them not unsympathetically. "Wounds heal quickly at your age — I am not pretending they don't smart, but they leave very slight scars. You must try to look at things sensibly. Yesterday and to-day have been a kind of interlude."

"I hope not," cried Everard.

"What else?" she asked.

He stooped towards Elsa.

"It is for you to say, dear," he answered.

"That," said Mrs. Wingood-Smyth, "places Elsa in an unfair position. There are things a young girl takes for granted, which she very properly leaves to her elders. It is not quite fair to pretend the decision rests with Elsa."

"With whom does it rest?" Everard demanded.

"Elsa will, of course, be guided by me," said Mrs. Wingood-Smyth. "I think you should treat her more generously. You can't make bricks without straw, Mr. Rothesay!"

"Straw is procurable," he suggested.

"Really," she retorted, "it is hard to imagine you in the act. There are drones and working-bees."

"You class me with the drones!"

"To drop metaphor," she said, "I class you with those extremely agreeable young men whom we all like so much, but whom one can't imagine either toiling or spinning."

"Still," Everard urged, "your opinion of me doesn't alter the fact that the decision rests ultimately with Elsa!"

"Not at all," said Mrs. Wingood-Smyth, not ceasing her fancy-work for an instant. Everard felt irritated as he watched her hands. "The decision rests with circumstances," she continued, "Fate, Providence, whatever term you please. The necessity is due to your own folly. After

blowing up the bridge you still expect to be able to cross the stream!"

"It 's true it may take longer to swim, but — "

"My dear Mr. Rothesay, the current is too swift to allow you to swim even alone. But you are so ridiculously young and hopeful. Ten years hence you will be more worldly-wise."

"I don't pretend to forecast the years," cried Everard; "but Elsa promised to be my wife yesterday and I shall hold her to her promise until she asks me to release her."

"Do you think that is quite fair?" asked Mrs. Wingood-Smyth, while Elsa sat perfectly silent.

"I merely ask her to decide," he insisted.

"To decide what?"

"That she will be my wife," he said.

Mrs. Wingood-Smyth looked down at her fancy-work and laughed quietly.

"It is so ludicrously impracticable!" she exclaimed. "There is something almost idyllic about the idea — only we live in a prosaic age."

"I suppose," Everard retorted, "there 's poetry in all our lives if we 've eyes to see."

"Ah, you require spectacles," she said.

"Anyhow," he persisted, "the world is very much what we make it." He rested a hand lightly on Elsa's shoulder. "It might be an Eden for us."

He looked down at her fair head, at the hands nervously interlocked.

"In Eden, you may remember," Mrs. Wingood-Smyth returned, "there was no rent to pay. Clothes were scarcely an item. And, you know, children had n't been born into the world. Man had not been condemned to work for his sins!"

"I am eager to work," cried Everard. "I will work the skin off my fingers."

"Do you imagine that would prove a gratification to anybody? Besides, how absurd! The habit of romancing must be difficult to shake off. Let us keep to realities!"

"I will be as literal as you please," he said. "Elsa has nothing, I have a little."

"You certainly have an immense amount of assurance, Mr. Rothesay."

At one moment Elsa's heart beat fast; the next her pulses seemed to stop.

"Am I to understand, then," Mrs. Wingood-Smyth demanded after a pause, during which her fancy-work must have progressed rapidly, "that you actually propose that Elsa shall marry you?"

"Yes," Everard answered, "that is what I propose."

"How do you imagine you would live?" she asked, with a sharp glance at Elsa.

"Of course," he said, "our lives would be — well, I daresay it would be rather like a picnic to begin with."

"Very much like a picnic, I think! and a little monotonous. Not much like the life Elsa was used to at Oakchester, for instance."

"Not at first, probably."

"I think," she said, "you were doubtful about the amount of your income when I questioned you a week or two ago?"

Everard shifted his position uneasily.

"Also as to the amount of your debts," she continued. "But although you have not been able to keep yourself, you coolly propose to support Elsa as well. Do you know how much her dressmaker's bill amounts to for the present season?"

"Oh, don't, don't!" cried Elsa with a shudder.

"My dear child, I am answering Mr. Rothesay according to his folly. I assure you the discussion has no enticement as far as I am concerned. Since you were born, you have hardly had a desire ungratified. You have always been surrounded by luxury. All your habits are extravagant. You love the best of everything. Mr. Rothesay suggests you should become practically *déclassée*. That is what it amounts to! You are a pair of inexperienced children. My dear Mr. Rothesay,

your ignorance is your only excuse. If you knew what you were talking about you could not make such an egregious proposal."

"Of course," Everard said testily, "it is easy to laugh my case out of court."

"I was never more serious," she protested. "Indeed it is no laughing-matter. Elsa would not find it so. She would be the most wretched of women and you the most miserable of men."

"I should like to try the experiment!" he said.

"It has been tried often enough," she retorted.

"And succeeded," he insisted.

"Mr. Rothesay," said Mrs. Wingood-Smyth, pressing her needle-work down on her knees and looking up not unsympathetically into his solemn face, "I am not too old to remember when I was young, or so worldly as to regard money as the one thing needful. Young people have begun at the bottom before now and climbed together, and no doubt their reward has been great. But they have not been young people like you and Elsa."

"You are not my advocate," he answered.

"Did you imagine I could be — knowing you so well!"

"Still," he insisted, "I am going to ask you to let me speak to Elsa alone. I have a right to an answer from her own lips."

"I think," said Mrs. Wingood-Smyth, "you are trying to take advantage of the situation."

"I would do anything in the world to keep Elsa to her promise," he replied.

"Even to the extent of spoiling her life?"

"Is n't that begging the question?" said Everard. "I believe I can make her life a very happy one."

"You would hate one another in six months. Elsa would miss something every hour of the day. What originality you possess would be crushed out of you. I shall give you five minutes," she added, rising and going towards the door.

As Everard closed it behind her he turned abruptly, holding forth his arms to Elsa. But she still kept her seat on the sofa, gazing at him mistily.

"Elsa!" he said.

She only looked into his face. He drew nearer.

"Am I to lose you, dear?" he asked.

"What can I do!" she murmured.

"Be my wife and take the risk," he said eagerly.

"You heard what my aunt said, Everard!"

"But, darling, it is your future that is at stake. It is you who must decide."

"I think," Elsa said wearily, "you decided when you told your cousin."

"It is not as though there were any hurry," he urged. "We can wait."

"It might be for years!"

"But try to picture the beyond, Elsa. And think of the alternative."

"Oh, I would do almost anything!" she cried, rising impetuously. "But — but I think my aunt is right."

"Then you have made up your mind," he said, as she stood gazing pathetically into his eyes. "You have not taken long," he added reproachfully.

"Ah, I have thought of it often," she answered, "at a time when you would never have asked me, though things were exactly the same as to-day."

"Yesterday had not dawned, Elsa. Our lips had not kissed, dear!"

"It is cruel to talk of yesterday," she continued. "Often I used to ask myself — knowing what you desired, though you dared not speak of it — often I asked myself whether it could be, and knowing what you were and what I was, I saw it could not. I see that now, Everard, dearly as I should love to be your wife."

"And the obstacle," he cried, "is a different sort of house to live in —"

"A different sort of world," she said gently.

"But we should live together in it, dear. I see," he added, as she showed no sign of yielding,

"Mrs. Wingood-Smyth has been coaching you privately."

"Yes," Elsa admitted, "and it sounded hateful and mean, but I felt she was right."

"It seems a strange anticlimax to yesterday," he said.

"And you blame me for it!" she faltered. "You will go away angry with me, but I think fate is to blame."

"If we have the courage to take our lives in our hands," he urged, "we can live them as we like."

"No," she answered, "if I felt that — but it would n't be so. I can picture the life you describe — only I feel it is n't for you and me. I should like — but I — I can't. It would be madness, Everard."

"I wish you were a little mad, dear." After a short pause, he held forth his hand. "Good-bye, Elsa," he said.

"Good-bye — "

He leaned forward and kissed her lips, then turning abruptly quitted the room without another word, and made his way out of the house.

Upon the ensuing few months, Everard Rothesay never cared to look back. His income diminished; his debts increased. At the time of Susannah's wedding he was in Paris. But when, shortly before

Christmas, he read in a society paper the announcement that "a marriage had been arranged and would shortly take place" between Elsa and Lord Fereday, he began to wear his rue with a difference.

Realising that the world was still moving onwards, though he might be standing still, Everard got to work again and naturally turned his recent experiences to account. It was generally admitted the psychology of his next novel was of a higher order than that of his last.

Fortune had dealt him a severe buffet, but henceforth he carried himself more jauntily, so that she, fickle jade, repaying him in kind, began to smile, too.

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